

His Soul to Keep

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His Soul to Keep

by [mokuyoubi](#)

Summary

On the eve of his fourteenth birthday, Will Graham's parents were murdered and his home burned to the ground. He himself was held captive by the perpetrators as a part of their dark rituals, but the demon they sought came to Will instead, and struck a deal. Now, two years later, with the demon's help, Will has rebuilt his home and family's empire. But once he completes his revenge on the men and women who killed his parents, his soul is forfeit.

Illustrations by the incomparable [thesevoices](#).

A recasting of Kuroshitsuji with Hannibal as Sebastian, Will as Ciel, and other Hannibal characters filling in the rest of the cast.

Notes

I want to thank [thesevoices](#) for suggesting this collaboration. It's not an AU I would have come up with on my own, but it suits Hannigram beautifully, and I've had so much fun writing this. Please, go show them love for their amazing art and for being such an inspiration for my writing.

A few important notes:

1. This is a WIP that is already pretty far along. I anticipate finishing it with no issue, and I have plenty of chapters lined up to post in the meantime while working on it. However, as a collaboration, I can't always anticipate when it will be ready to post. I am hoping that there will be no more than a month between parts, but I can't say for certain. All ratings and tags are for the story as a whole, not the individual chapters. When the fic becomes sexual/explicit, I will provide warnings on that chapter.

2. Though I have borrowed from the basic plotline of Kuroshitsuji, there are some pretty big deviations and new stories, as well. This should make it accessible to readers who are unfamiliar with the manga/anime, while also have some surprises in store for those who are fans of it. As of this time, I have no plans to include any of the characters from Kuroshitsuji, but that may change in the future!

A Deal is Struck

His Soul To Keep



Written by @Moku-youbi, Illustrations by @TheSeaVoices



When he was seven years old, Will climbed the old oak tree at the edge of the forest, even though his parents had forbade it. He broke his arm when he fell, and it was the most excruciating pain. His mother had held him, petting his hair as the doctor set the bone, and he'd cried uncontrollably. It was the worst pain anyone on Earth had ever endured. It was so much pain, he said, he'd rather die than keep on living feeling like this.

Now, as Will was shoved back into his cell by rough hands, sent sprawling on the stone floor, he thought back on how pathetic he'd been, and how utterly wrong.

The cell was always shockingly cold when he was first returned to it. He would huddle up in the corner by the pile of straw meant to be a bed, and after a while, his skin grew numb. There was a bucket for waste and a single meal served in the morning, of ale and mouldy bread. Will drank the ale and left the bread for the rats.

A single, barred window cast cool winter light in the room. Will could just reach if he stood on his toes, fingers brushing the sill, but he was too weak to haul himself up. Even if he could, there would be no escape. The cell was well made. The door was solid metal and firmly attached. Will had thrown himself at it tirelessly when he'd first been imprisoned here. It wasn't going to budge. Likely the same could be said for the window.

Will looked dispassionately over the new bruises that mottled his skin. Blood had run into his left eye from the cut on his forehead, down from the corner of his mouth from his split lip; his right eye was swollen shut and had been for several days. From the way it burned and itched deep in his skull, he suspected there was an infection. It was only a matter of time before he lost it. The brand on the outside of his thigh throbbed with every beat of his heart.

The child he'd been would have wished for death. When his heart ceased to beat, the pain would all slip away. Will might have been about to celebrate his fourteenth birthday the night he was taken, but in the past few weeks, he'd left childhood behind. He wasn't interested in escaping the pain any longer.

All Will wanted was revenge.

Pushing himself onto his hands and knees was pure agony. Will stifled a cry, biting down hard on the inside of his cheek. The sensitive skin was already raw and pulpy, but he wouldn't give his captors the pleasure of hearing him beg. He gave up, slumping back to the floor on his back, putting a hand gingerly to his side.

A broken rib or two, above the place they'd cut across his belly, bleeding him for their ritual. It hadn't worked, that much he knew. The demon they hoped to call hadn't yet made his appearance, and that might have been the only reason that Will was still alive. No sense in finishing off their supply of virgin blood prematurely.

That wound was seeping, too. Will's hand came back wet and black in the dim light. He clenched it in a tight fist, balled against the hollow of his chest where he'd once thought he'd held emotions such as love and joy.

Now, Will knew, there was no such thing. He'd learned so much in his time here, about pain, yes, and the burning cold of all-consuming hatred. In the early days, he'd thought so often of his family, and wept bitter tears for their loss. He'd lain awake remembering the heat of the flames,

the embers sparking bright against the pitch black of the night, and how loud it had been. The roaring as the fire devoured his home, and his parents right along with it.

That had changed around the time Will had stopped trying to keep track of the days and weeks as they passed. After he'd been sold off to the highest bidder. Will's mind was occupied with thoughts of torture and murder--not his own, but that of the men and women who watched as his body was beaten, who laughed when he couldn't quite manage to hold back a sob of pain.

You have a monstrous imagination, his mother used to tease him. She had no idea how very true that was.

Will closed his eyes and saw his captors before him. Those shadowy figures in their fine clothing, features covered in decorative masks. But Will saw all the things they didn't think to cover--the doctor fresh from hospital with a splatter of blood at the hem of his trousers, smelling of decay and antiseptic; the widow who donated her time and money to the conservatory, with pollen on her sleeves and the fragrance of lilies hanging around her; the professor who smelled of dusty books and wore his family's ring prominently on his middle finger.

These small details spoke volumes to Will. He could imagine who they were outside of this place. And he could imagine what he would do to them.

The doctor, opened up like one of his patients. Will could feel the skin giving way under the scalpel, hot blood rushing over his hands as he worked. He could see the flesh peeled back, pinned in place like a bug in frame, revealing all the inner workings.

The widow's neck snapped by his own hands, plucked like one of her flowers. Body cold and stiff with death, dressed as a Grecian goddess. How he'd break her bones to pose her like one of the statues in her garden.

The professor's house burning to the ground, just like Will's had, taking all his precious family history with it. Will watching as the flesh split and cracked, turning black. Inhaling at the scent of roasting meat as the smoke curled around them both. He alone, untouched by the flames.

Will grit his teeth so hard he thought they might crack out of his jaw. He'd kill them all, in the manner befitting their crimes, and maybe then he'd know what peace was.

Around him the room grew dim. How much time had passed? It was only just dawn when they'd thrown him back in his cell. Will blinked the blood from his uninjured eye, and shook his head. The movement sent sharp, ringing pain through his skull and did nothing to dispel the vision of black smoke roiling across the floor. It spilled toward him like a liquid, and crept up the walls, blotting out the window.

In the corner crouched a creature. Its black form was mostly lost in shadow, but Will could just make out the gleam of its red eyes, the tips of its talon-like fingers scraping against the floor, and the curve of antlers rising from its head. They were strange and fantastical, sprouting thorns and crystals that caught and refracted the dull light in the room, turning it brilliant.

"I've never come across a mind such as your own," it said, in a decidedly masculine voice, thick with some foreign accent, "and I've sampled from thousands." It raised long, spindly fingers to its mouth and there was a flash of pink as its tongue flicked out to lick across its claws. "Delicious."

“You,” Will said. “You’re the demon they’ve been trying to call.” His words were slurred, vision blurring around the edges. Close to unconsciousness from pain, exhaustion, and blood loss.

It tipped its head to the side in a curious gesture. “So astute for one so young.” It rose to its feet and came closer. Skeletal and so tall the antlers would get caught on the ceiling, except them seemed to turn to smoke and pass right through. “You know why I am here?”

Will nodded his head once. “But I haven’t made the sacrifice.”

“Oh, I beg to differ,” it said. “Your sacrifice has been far greater than you realise, I’d wager.”

Will scoffed. “My family? My home? My freedom?”

Its face was alien in structure, jutting bones and flat planes, and Will found he could not read it as he could others. As far as he could see, there was nothing to read. Its eyes were hollow and vacant, its expression blank. “Inconsequential,” it said. “Those are sacrifices in which I have no interest.”

“Then what?” Will demanded.

“That,” it said, kneeling at Will’s side, “is not what I am here to discuss.”

“No,” Will agreed, little more than an exhale. “You’re here to make a deal, and you know what it is I have to offer. You’ve...tasted it. What will you give me, in exchange?”

“In exchange for a soul such as yours?” it asked. “You name the terms, dear boy.”

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Will woke to the sunlight on his face, and groaned, rolling onto his stomach. “Do you have to do that *every morning*?” he asked, voice muffled in his pillow.

“Early morning light exposure helps to regulate your circadian rhythm, Sir,” Hannibal murmured his perpetually soothing tone of voice.

“Certainly it is out of no desire to cause me discomfort,” Will said. He raised his head to pin Hannibal with a bleary glare. “You would never do that.”

Hannibal gave him a serene smile from the bedside table, where he placed the sterling silver platter bearing Will’s morning espresso. “Never, my Lord.”

The scent was intense and mouth-watering, enough to cause Will to begin to stir in earnest. He tossed back the covers and kicked his legs over the side of the bed, staring down to where his feet dangled above the floor, as they had done every morning for the past two years. As they would presumably continue to do forever. Or until his death at least.

Will wiggled his toes, lip pulling back in a moue of disdain. At his stature, at his train of thought, at Hannibal marching into his room every morning like he owned the place, tossing open the curtains. It often seemed as though the man forgot who his master was. “Coffee,” he said imperiously, holding out his hand.

“Did you know,” Hannibal said, almost conversationally, as he passed over the dainty espresso cup and saucer, “scientists are only beginning to grasp the full impact of caffeine upon the human body? It has been suggested that its consumption can stunt growth.”

“Hmm.” Will’s eyes fluttered closed in pleasure at the first sip. Hannibal could make all the passive aggressive comments he like about Will’s coffee habit, as long as he continued to make such a heavenly cup. He swallowed and licked his lips, chasing the flavour. It might be a childish gesture, but that’s how everyone saw him, anyway, wasn’t it? A child?

“Somehow, I doubt my morning espresso has anything to do with my stature,” he said, cutting a sharp look at his valet. He finished the rest of the cup in a single mouthful. Normally he would savour it, but this morning he had a meeting, and there was no time for dawdling.

“As you say, My Lord,” Hannibal said.

Sometimes, Will had the most powerful urge to smack him in his agreeable face. Today he was saved by the urge by Winston whuffling sleepily from the other side of the bed. He nosed over the sheets, nudging his damp nose against Will’s bare thigh, seeking attention that Will gladly gave. There was little he took pleasure in these days, Hannibal’s cooking and his hand in Winston’s silken fur being two notable exceptions.

Hannibal sniffed in distaste. “I do not understand why you allow that beast in your bed, when he has a perfectly serviceable one himself.”

Will arched a brow, pointedly scritchng under Winston’s chin. There was something he could say that might bring the tension between them to a breaking point, but he swallowed those words back. “It is no concern of yours,” he said instead. Winston couldn’t keep the nightmares at bay, but he was quick with comfort when they came.

“As you say, My Lord.” Will had a theory that Hannibal used the phrase to purposefully infuriate him, though he had no proof of it.



“I’ve laid out your clothing for the day.”

Will stood and stretched his arms over his head. The ends of his nightgown just brushed the tops of his thighs. It seemed as though the hem grew higher everyday, despite his unchanging stature. He tugged it down as he eyed the selection Hannibal had made.

“I thought we’d agreed on trousers from here on out,” he said.

“Breeches are in fashion for older boys this spring,” Hannibal said, stroking his finger down the shiny pearl buttons at the knee. “The crease sets them apart from those wore by the preadolescent set.”

They were brown houndstooth, and Will had little doubt they would fit like a dream. He sucked the inside of his cheek, a habit he kept meaning to shake, and met Hannibal’s gaze, unwavering.

“I can put in an order for some trousers, Sir,” Hannibal said. He was the perfect picture of acquiescence, and yet...

“Do,” Will ordered, and sighed. For now, he was stuck with this, and he already knew Hannibal would stretch out the order for weeks. By the time they finally arrived, it would be the height of summer in New Orleans, and Will would regret his insistence on full length trousers.

After donning the knee pants, Will allowed Hannibal to finish dressing him, draping him in the light-weight shirt and doing up the buttons with nimble fingers. Next his suspenders, Hannibal taking his time fastening them to the waist of pants and working the straps through their buckles and tightening the notches. Will fixed a studious gaze over Hannibal’s shoulder, enduring the attention with stoic silence.

The necktie was a vibrant pale blue, tied in a looping bow with Hannibal’s nimble fingers, ends dangling down Will’s chest, as was the fashion and fixed with a pearl and diamond pin. Hannibal knelt at Will’s feet sliding each garter into place with a snap of elastic, then each stocking.

“You’ll be meeting with Mister Lombardi this morning,” Hannibal reminded him. His thumb brushed over the curve of Will’s calves as he tugged the stockings into place, smooth over the hairless skin. Tickling, as he tugged the garters into place just below his knee. “He will be arriving at the marina at 9.”

“I am aware,” Will snapped. He glanced down without fully intending to do so and caught Hannibal looking up at him. The expression on Hannibal’s face, lashes dipped low, froze Will to the spot. He was all too aware of Hannibal’s palm, burning hot on the underside of his knee.

A small smile curled Hannibal’s lips, and he stood, turning his back to gather up the jacket. “My apologies, My Lord,” he said. “I know how much this particular meeting means to you. I only wish to ensure that you are fully prepared.”

Will got to his feet, holding onto the back of the chair, overcome by sudden dizziness. Taking a steadying breath, he extended his arms and pushed into the sleeves of the matching houndstooth.

“Mister Lombardi will accept the terms I lay forth, or he will be cut free,” he said. “It’s as simple as that.”

“Of course,” Hannibal agreed, as he tugged the jacket into place, smoothing the lines. Will watched their reflections in the mirror, appreciating how nicely put-together the ensemble was. Even if he’d have preferred a longer trouser, Will felt well-armed for his meeting in the suit. Hannibal had impeccable taste, there was no arguing with that. Though he was small in stature, he could be imposing in other ways. “He is no match for your business acumen.”

It was difficult for Will to know for certain if he was being mocked and erred on the side of caution. “At the very least, he is no match for you,” Will murmured, turning this way and that before the mirror, admiring his reflection.

“No, indeed he is not,” Hannibal said, voice barely more than a whisper. Will met his eyes in the mirror, unable but to return the cruel grin that spread over Hannibal’s face with a smirk of his own. “I am, after all, one hell of a butler.”

Will rolled his eyes. Feigning boredom and shrugging out from under Hannibal’s touch, he beckoned Winston to his side. “Go and fetch my breakfast, Hannibal.”

Hannibal sketched out a neat little bow, but Will didn’t miss the flash of fire in his eyes.

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As the last living descendant of his mother’s line, and the only son and direct heir of his father’s line, Will Graham, the Earl of Phantomhive, precariously straddled two destinies. Both the Graham and Phantomhive fortunes were haunted by their dark pasts, built on the backs of slaves and indentured servitude. Their success was at the price of pain, sweat, and tears of those men and women. Will felt the weight of far too many deaths on his shoulders, and he felt it profoundly.

The Graham plantation was a sprawling three thousand acres of sugarcane. For sixty years, that was how the family grew their fortune, in what Will’s grandfather had called that *golden antebellum* age. Then his grandfather passed, and his father met the Countess of Phantomhive.

The Phantomhives had dipped their fingers in all sorts of pies over the years, but the wealth had dwindled over time, thanks to the drinking and gambling of the Earl. Then, in 1867, Lady Betta visited Japan. Will’s mother was far cleverer than her father, then on his deathbed, and knew a good investment when she saw one.

After being taken on a tour of shallow shoals where divers brought back oysters and split them open to reveal their shining treasure, Betta decided to explore the relatively untapped market in the Americas. She poured what remained of her meagre inheritance into the pearl industry, and found a willing partner in business and in life with James Graham, and within a couple of years the returns had exceeded their greatest expectations.

It was a dangerous profession, especially in the Gulf of Mexico, where she did the majority of her business. Divers had to go far deeper to collect oysters, and shark attacks were frequent, on top of the deaths by drowning. But these weren’t the concerns of the aristocracy. At any rate, it was more profitable than the sugar business in the post-war days, having to pay wages.

Will often had difficulty reconciling the parents he loved with the things they'd done. In particular, his father's actions in life puzzled him to no end. How could he have allowed the treatment of the men and women who toiled on his land? How could he have known about the conditions of the divers and the mortality rate and still send them out day after day?

Because, you see, besides the title and the fortune, the land and the sugar, the pearls and the boats, Will had inherited one more thing from his parents. From his father, specifically. James had called it a gift: look into a person's eyes, and see their secrets laid bare. As Will understood it, the extent of his father's abilities had been nowhere near his own. Will knew it for what it truly was: punishment.

Avoiding eye contact only went so far to ease the onslaught of emotions weighing in upon him from all sides. Yes, it saved him from seeing all the darkest, cruelest impulses, but it could not shield him from the mundane, everyday dreariness of the human condition. The sadness and dissatisfaction of his workers, the greed of his peers, the pity of those who cared for him, the scorn of the men who believed him no more than a boy, unfit to run his family business.

Hannibal alone was the exception. In his presence there was nothing but silence, Will left alone to his own thoughts and emotions. But then what was there to reflect upon in the absence of a soul?

James, and his father before him, might have been able to ignore the torment of his workers. Either they hadn't felt it as strongly as he did, or they were better able to shield themselves against it, but Will could not. He would not stand idly by and let the power hungry, money grubbing managers and overseers continue to conduct business as they had in the past.

Putting to rights the conditions on the plantation had been a far easier. Will was able to walk amongst his workers on a daily basis and see that his new rules and conditions were being followed to the letter. Those overseers who could not abide by the rules were let go, and there were more than a few of them who insisted on falling back on the old means of punishment.

Will's father had paid a wage that gave the workers no opportunity to look elsewhere for employment, but also kept them from ever hoping to own land for themselves. Now Will had raised wages, improved the living quarters, and implemented a plan whereby the former slaves could work a fifty acre area of land, retaining a percentage of the crop for themselves, until they were able to purchase the land outright.

Unsurprisingly, the response to his changes by the overseers and his fellow plantation owners had been unenthusiastic, to say the very least. There was some particular bitterness owed to the fact that Will's workforce, pleased with their conditions, were also more productive and loyal.

Similar resistance had been met to the proposed changes in the pearl hunting operation. The problem there was that they were too vast and distantly scattered for Will to personally ensure his orders were being followed. He relied on the men and women who managed the divers to see that conditions improved.

Mister Lombardi oversaw divers from Mississippi, Alabama, and Florida, based in St. Petersburg. There was a large freshwater operation along the Mississippi River, and others along the coast of central America and dotting the islands of the Caribbean. Some of them brought in a

far greater number of pearls, but Lombardi's operation was by far the most lucrative, thanks to the natural occurring black pearls in the Gulf of Mexico, rarely found elsewhere.

Will had recently received reports that Lombardi had increased the daily number of oysters expected from his workers and there had already been one death that Will could attribute to that. A young man, an indentured servant from Japan, purportedly looking for a pearl large enough to pay off his debt.

According to his friends, he'd taken to tying heavy rocks to his ankles and going deeper than the other divers in the area. When he'd risen from the extreme depths, he'd blacked out and drowned. It wasn't an unusual story when it came to pearling, but it was precisely the sort of thing Will wished to eradicate altogether.

"After your meeting with Mister Lombardi, you have a lunch meeting with Takimoto-san at Poirier's, and your aunt is coming for tea this afternoon," Hannibal said, as they made their way down the quay.

Will nobly fought the urge to sigh. "You didn't think to get my approval, first."

Hannibal lifted a single brow. "That presupposes the possibility that Madame Red would take no for an answer."

There was really no arguing with that logic. "Very well," Will said, grudgingly. "You should make sure we have a fresh bottle of the Laphroaig Special."

"Already done, sir." They shared an amused look as they reached the gangway. "I shall await your orders."

Will nodded and started to board the boat, stopped by Hannibal's hand coming to rest just below the nape of his neck. Through two layers of clothing, Will's skin tingled and his hair stood on end. "You need only call my name," Hannibal reminded him.

Clearing his throat, Will shrugged his shoulders and dislodged the touch, and strode up the gangway. He was aware of Hannibal following at a more sedate pace, self-satisfied. Will fought the urge to scratch at the spot he'd touched, at least until he was no longer in Hannibal's line of vision.

"Mister Lombardi!" The man was standing at the bow of the ship, looking out over the marina, and turned to grant Will a smile. It was an expression Will was familiar with, one that didn't even require his gift to read. The sort of smile reserved for children, a mask of false affability.

"Mister Graham," Lombardi said. He bent a bit to put himself at eye-level with Will, hands braced on his thighs. "What a delight."

"You will address the Earl as Lord Graham, Mister Lombardi," Hannibal said. Though his tone was even, something in it made Lombardi stand up straight, contrite.

Darting a nervous look to Hannibal, he bowed his head. "My apologies, My Lord."

Will flicked his hand casually. "It is unimportant. We're in America after all. Hannibal, tell the captain we're ready to cast off."

After Hannibal had gone, Will relaxed his posture and gave Lombardi an easy smile. "I'm sorry for Hannibal's behaviour," he said. "He is an excellent valet, old fashioned."

Lombardi relaxed as well, some of that casual condescension seeping back into his expression. "It's quite alright. European sentimentality, I suppose." He leaned against the railing of the boat, absently stroking a hand along the polished wood. "This is an impressive boat."

"I thought we could throw a line or two," Will said. There was an array of fishing equipment already laid out for their use. "The lemon fish are migrating up the coast. Hannibal makes a delicious blackened cobia."

"Ah, it is not exactly my area of expertise, but I'm game," Lombardi said. He chose one of the rods, seemingly at random, frowning vaguely. "I am eager to discuss the diving suit prototype I had mocked up, after my visit from Mister Wick last month. The Australians have been using them for some time now, and--"

"There's a spot not too far from here," Will said, choosing his own customary rod, personalised for his height and build. "The cobia are easy to spot in the shallower water, meaning we don't have to go out to sea."

Lombardi, nonplussed, nodded. "Oh, ah, yes. Very good, My Lord. I had no idea you were interested in fishing."

"I find it a very pleasant pastime," Will agreed. "The sea is so peaceful. Or so it seems, on the surface. Yet there is a whole different world that exists beneath the hull of this very ship, teeming with life."

"Indeed," Lombardi chuckled, a nervous sound. "As I was saying, the suits would allow the divers to reach far greater depths and remain underwater for an extended period of time. The amount of shells collected would be--"

"You know, when I was a little boy," Will began, ignoring the muffled scoff his words earned him, "I used to think the pearl divers had the most exciting job. They got to see all the fascinating creatures I've only ever seen in picture books--tropical fish and colourful corals. Of course, that was before understood about the loss of vision associated with repeated dives."

"Yes," Lombardi said, "Which is why these new suits are such a great advance."

"I find that I am inclined to agree with you," Will said. "In fact, if the prototype stands up well to rigorous testing, I would like to outfit all of the divers in my employ."

Lombardi lit up with a brilliant smile. "I am glad to hear you say so! Now, with an investment of six thousand dollars from you, Mister Wick can begin to process your order."

Will leaned over the side of the boat, peering into the rippling blue water. In the distance, he could make out a large, dark form darting below the surface. He watched as another came into focus, and third, following the line of the shore though at a distance.

"Of course," Lombardi went on filling the silence, "with the revenue from the increased output, you'll make that back and more within a few months."

“You have to wait until you’re right alongside them and be careful when you throw your line-- you want the bait to land right in front of him, but with a light enough touch that he doesn’t startle,” Will explained.

“Absolutely thrilling.” Disdain dripped from Lombardi’s words.

Will favoured him with a glance. He fought the sneer that threatened. “It is a test of your skill and patience against a creature’s survival instinct, in a fight to the death.”

“That is an...interesting perspective, My Lord,” Lombardi said. He looked vaguely discomfited at the thought.

“How about a game?” Will turned his back on the ocean, resting his elbows on the edge of bow. “To see which of us hooks one first.”

“Oh, I don’t think it would be much of a contest,” Lombardi protested. “I have no skill as a fisherman.”

“I insist,” Will said. “Cobia range in size from twenty pounds to sixty or more, and can be as long as a fully grown man. I would say the odds are in your favour.”

He went to the bucket of live shrimps and fished one out to hook on his line. Lombardi pulled a face as he followed in suit, shaking his damp hand as though he had no idea what to do with it, having touched the shrimp.

“Ah, the single mindedness of children,” Lombardi said, that smiling mask back in place.

Will dropped his own polite mask, eyes cold, mouth pressed in a thin line. He turned on Lombardi, shoulders drawn tight. “Excuse me?”

Their eyes met, and Will could sense the man’s general arrogance, tempered by a distinct feeling of unease, and derision towards Will, in particular. How intolerable, to be at the mercy of the whims of a boy.

“I was merely saying, Lord Graham,” Lombardi hemmed, averting his gaze, “that such relentlessness is an admirable trait of the youth of today, and has no doubt contributed to your success as a businessman!”

“Hah,” Will huffed an unamused laugh. He rested his rod against the side of the boat and discarded his jacket, draping it over the bench. Then, picking up his rod again, he took a step back for the side, lifted his arm in the air and with a graceful arc, threw the line out to sea.

“So, if you’re interested in investing, we could finalise the details now. I’m having lunch with Mister Wick this afternoon,” Lombardi said. “Actually, we should be heading back to shore soon, don’t you think?”

Will gave Lombardi an expectant look. “I haven’t hooked my fish yet, Mister Lombardi.” He jerked his chin in the direction of Lombardi’s fishing pole.

The man sighed--Will could feel his frustration rippling outward like rings on the water’s surface--and tossed his line out. Apparently under the impression that swinging as hard as he

could was the best course of action, his line went soaring through the air and landed with an audible splash.

“It requires a delicate touch,” Will murmured, not much more than a whisper. There was a gentle tug on his own line. He’d attracted some interest, but it was not yet time to reel him in. Slowly, carefully, he shifted the fishing rod to one hand and began to unbutton his shirt with the other.

Lombardi reeled back in his line and tried again. This time, it was as if the series of events had been scripted ahead of time, and merely played out according to plan. The line went wide, hitting the boom and ricocheting back, wrapping around, before the hook caught in Lombardi’s cheek. He let out a startled cry of pain, stumbled backward, and went straight overboard.

Will watched the splash he made dispassionately as he shrugged out of his shirt altogether. “Hannibal,” he called, voice ringing out over the sudden silence. “Take care of Mister Lombardi.”

The spot below Will’s neck, now exposed, tingled at his words. A dull throb echoed from his back through the cage of blood and bone and flesh, and burst out from his skin like a shockwave. Hannibal was at his side in an instant, fangs bared in a grin. “As you say, My Lord.”

“Hmph,” Will snorted. As Hannibal followed Lombardi over the side of the boat, Will began to reassemble his clothing.

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Ezio Lombardi sank down quickly--far more quickly than should have been possible. The water was shockingly cold, and seemed to have substance. It twined around him like tendrils, tugging him deeper and deeper, restraining him, rendering him incapable of moving his arms or kicking his legs. When he blinked open his eyes, he could see the surface far above, the sparkling sunlight growing dimmer by the second.

He cried out in panic and somehow water did not flood his mouth. The sound he made was muffled but audible, echoing out through the deep murky green water. Cautiously, he inhaled, and to his utter amazement, his lungs expanded with air. Though he still could not move his limbs, the panic receded a bit, replaced with a growing wonder.

How was this possible?

As the boy had described, the water around him was full of life. In the relatively shallow waters so close to the shore, schools of small silver fish darted past. There were a variety of larger, solitary fish lazily drifting past, more than Ezio had ever realised existed. The plain and the ugly, certainly, but others too fantastic to properly describe--bright colours and stripes, translucent fins that shimmered delicately like a woman’s shawl in the wind, spined fish rippling vivid banners along like the masts of a ship.

At last Ezio came to rest on the ocean floor. Around him the plant life swayed with the current, oranges and pinks and greens. The sand was dotted with all sorts of creatures. Crabs and turtles and the odd clam, starfish and barnacle crusted debris.

It seemed as though an eternity had passed since he’d fallen from the side of the boat. Graham must have called for help by now? Though Ezio was miraculously still breathing, there was a

growing pressure in his chest, as if something heavy was slowly crushing him. With each passing breath, it became more and more difficult to draw a complete lungful of air.

If he shifted his weight from side to side, Ezio was able to move, albeit slowly, yet still his limbs would not cooperate with him. As he did, a giant clam came into view, to his right. It was as large as a fully grown man--larger, in fact, and through its parted shells, he caught a glimpse of the pearl it held. Glistening black and bigger than his head. He'd never heard of such a thing. It must be worth a fortune.

Ezio let out a whoop of excitement, voice lost, diffused in the water. If only he could reach it, if only he could bring it to the surface, he would be free of whims of that petulant child. He could afford to go into business for himself and get out of America once and for all.

Inch by inch, he made his way across the sand, hips and shoulders moving counter to one another, when suddenly he became aware of a great, dark shape at his side. Ezio looked more fully and saw it was one of the cobia. Slick dark flesh, jagged ridges along the spine, and eyes that glowed bright red in the gloom of the sea. There was something strangely familiar about it that unsettled Ezio.

I can help you, Ezio heard, the words reverberating in his skull. *Follow me*. The cobia twist upward, heading towards the distant sunlight, and Ezio hesitated.

"Wait!" The cobia paused, turning back. Its face was like any other fish, beady eyes and mouth split in a grimace through its scales, but Ezio felt as though it were wearing an expectant expression. "The pearl..."

Oh you don't want that, it purred, tail fin flicking like a hand waved. *Only a fool would go after it. Let me lead you to safety*.

Ezio glanced up at the surface, then back at the pearl. Algae and sand drifted through the water, obscuring his view. He blinked several times, trying to clear his vision, but everything was growing hazy. If he could only breathe deeply again. But first, the pearl.

When he moved again, there was still that dark thing in his periphery. It took a moment for him to realise it wasn't another creature he was seeing, but himself. Those movements out of the corner of his eye were fins sprouting from where his arms had been.

"What--What's happened to me?" Ezio cried.

Come to the surface. You'll be whole again.

Once again, Ezio glanced upward. The dark shape of Graham's boat moved slowly overhead, blotting out the light. Even with the returning panic at the realisation over his transformation, he could not ignore the pearl, just waiting to be plucked.

Don't be fooled by the allure of it, the cobia warned. A sinister note carried across the water between them. *Follow me*.

Perhaps, if he no longer had his hands and arms, he could take the pearl in his mouth and carry it with him that way... Ezio swayed back and forth, back and forth, ever closer, and opened the maw that had replaced his mouth, water rushing into his mouth.

The pearl was right there. Right there, beckoning him closer.

Ezio strained forward.

Pain lanced through his face, hooking through his cheek from the inside out. A line pulled taut jerked him backwards, away from his prize and began dragging him upwards. *A shame*, that voice said, oddly familiar.

The hook through his cheek pulled him towards the surface at breakneck speed and he felt the drag of the water trying to hold him back. Ezio struggled, but that only caused his flesh to tear. It did nothing to slow his progress.

Breaking through the waves, nausea and dizziness overtook Ezio. The pressure in his chest felt as though his lungs had collapsed altogether, and his vision was spotted with black around the edges, spreading over his eyes, blinding him. Hands gripped at his fins and brought him over the side of the ship and he landed on the deck with a wet thud.

Graham stood over him, holding his fishing rod and crouched to take the hook from Ezio's cheek. "Put my men at risk, rob them of their profits, and now this." Graham sighed. "Do you take me for a fool, Mister Lombardi? I know you purchased the suits already, and I know you paid three thousand for them. Still, I was willing to give you a chance."

Suddenly the valet, Hannibal, was standing behind Graham, where he hadn't been before. Water dripped water from the ends of his hair, though he looked otherwise impeccable. For the first time, Ezio noticed the red spark in his eyes.

"You are far too generous, My Lord," Hannibal said. He placed a hand on the boy's neck. "What would you have me do?"

Graham placed a thoughtful finger to his pursed lips. "You *can* do wonders with cobia," Graham said. "Perhaps we should see if Takimoto would care to join us for dinner at the manor, instead. I'm certain he would be delighted by your cooking."

Hannibal nodded once. "Very good." He crouched alongside the boy, and Ezio felt a stabbing pain in his gut. Everything went to black.

~*~

At the end of a long allée of twisted, arching oak trees curtained with Spanish moss, stood the main house, a stark, pristine white in the sun. Eight heavy-corniced columns supported the hip roof of the front of the house, with an unadorned frieze over the entrance. Double curved staircases led from the neatly maintained lawn to the balcony that ran the length of the second floor.

Though the original had burned to the ground and taken Will's parents with it, the new stood in the same place, painstakingly recreated in the Greek Revival style, down to the last detail. It was as grand and formidable as ever it had been, inspiring awe in all who visited.

All thirty-two rooms were just as they had been when Will had been a boy. The same gleaming parquet, polished rosewood, and marble flooring. The same textured wallpapers, wainscoting,

and decorative moulding. Chandeliers and carpets and fixtures ordered from overseas, furniture upholstered in specially manufactured fabrics based on Will's designs.

The kitchen had been stocked with the same china and silver and crystal, the beds dressed in the same linens. Down to the fixtures on the windows and doors, and the paintings the lined the walls, Will had seen to it that it was as if the manor had never been destroyed at all.

Upon arriving home, Will changed into a more casual suit that wasn't covered in sea water and fish guts. By the time he made his way down to the patio, his aunt had already arrived. As was customary for her, since she'd ended the mourning period for her husband, she was dressed entirely in red--today a vibrant scarlet brocade with an oriental pattern and garnet taffeta underskirt, matching her bonnet. A fall of white lace at her throat brightened the ensemble.

The sunlight caught on the rubies that decorated her fingers when she lifted them in a wave at his approach. "Will," she greeted, red lips curving in an approximation of a smile.

Will could sense her affection for him, but as with all her emotions since her husband's passing, they were dull and distant. He reached her side, allowing her to take his elbows in her delicate grip and bend to busk a kiss against his cheek. "Aunt Bedelia," he said. "I'm sorry to have kept you waiting."

Madame Red took a sip from her teacup, no doubt doctored, and her lips twitched. "Hannibal has been seeing to my needs." Hannibal favoured her with a small, flirtatious smile, bent over in the process of laying out the tray of sandwiches.

"Yes," Will said, voice tight, "he goes above and beyond the call of duty. I can pour my own tea perfectly well, Hannibal; I've been doing it for years now." He made a shooing gesture. "Go see to dinner." After an infinitesimal pause, Hannibal straightened and made his way in doors.

"You don't deserve Hannibal," Madame Red said. "You don't appreciate him at all."

Will rolled his eyes. "You only say that because you have Matthew for a butler." The man was enthusiastic, and that was the best Will could say for him.

Madame Red gave him a small, single huff of laughter and raised her teacup in agreement, before taking a long draught. "He only managed to destroy one of your china settings today before Hannibal distracted him with some work in the laundry. Of course you'll let me know if there are any linens that need replacing?"

"Why you keep him around--"

"Matthew means well. And until you are willing to part with Hannibal, what choice have I?" It was an old joke at this point, one that had started out as gentle ribbing but now had a more pointed edge. It was the faintest thread of envy that discomfited Will, to feel coming from his aunt.

"Auntie." Will tried to keep the thread of impatience out of his voice. "To what do I owe the pleasure of your visit today?"

Madame Red watched him blankly, and for a moment Will thought she was going to chastise him for his rudeness. Since his parent's passing, she'd struggled with just how to handle him. It

was definitely not normal for a boy of his age to be left to his own devices, but they both knew Bedelia lacked the mothering instinct.

“Alana is returning at the end of the month,” she said, not quite an answer. “She’ll be staying with me in town for the foreseeable future.”

His cousin, Madame Red’s niece, Alana was one year his senior. For a time, there had been talk of an arranged marriage between them. Thankfully, after the fire, that talk had ceased. It was not openly discussed, but people were afraid of him, returning apparently unharmed after his disappearance. What had once seemed an appropriate, even favourable match with an earl, had now soured.

They had been playmates in their youth, but these days Alana looked at him with cautious concern and pity in her gaze. Her parents didn’t bother to hide their feelings of mistrust. It was clear their intent, sending Alana to stay with Madame Red shortly after her seventeenth birthday.

“If only your sister knew just where your work as a coroner takes you, she might be as wary of her daughter keeping your company, as she is her keeping mine.”

Drinking again from her teacup, Madame Red said, “I don’t put much stock in my sister’s opinion in those things she doesn’t understand. Yourself included. I know Alana would like to see you again. Would you like to see her?”

If there was a part of Will that had remained untouched by all the tragedy in his life, he would see Alana as an opportunity to reconnect to who it was that he used to be. To remember the simpler times before the death of his parents, when the most complicated thing in his life was how he felt about Alana.

“I’m very busy right now,” Will said, standing abruptly. “I’ve got a business to run and this Black Hand business to deal with for Jack. If you came just to discuss Alana, I’m afraid I’m going to have to ask that we continue this conversation at another time.”

As he turned, he spied Hannibal watching them through the open window to the parlour. Will jerked his head in the direction of his aunt, as good as an order, and they both knew it. As long as Hannibal understood an order, he was bound to carry it out. In a flash, Hannibal was on the porch with them, ready to provide a distraction with Madame Red so Will could escape.

Will felt Bedelia’s annoyance melt into faint interest and intrigue at Hannibal’s appearance, and he saw the way Hannibal played to her so beautifully, all appeasing smiles and sitting by her side on the wicker bench--too close for propriety, and certainly for a butler.

“I’ll talk the young master around to it,” Will heard him murmuring in an undertone, and snorted to himself. He wished Hannibal luck in that particular endeavour.

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Left to his own devices, Hannibal could see to the Graham estate himself; he’d had more taxing jobs over the course of several lifetimes. Still, his master didn’t want to draw undue attention, and the manor and grounds were extensive, and so retained a staff.

Reba, whose mother had held the position of Housekeeper until retiring three years prior, had taken up the position in her stead. There had been some muttering among the other ladies that she wasn't up to the task, thanks to her blindness, but Will hardly cared about such things. She knew very well how to manage her staff. If they had laboured under the misapprehension that they could scrape by on mediocre effort simply because she could not see it, Reba took great delight in proving them wrong.

Jimmy was in charge of the grounds and spent the majority of his time in the pigeonier and apiary, leaving the maintenance of the lawn and gardens to his staff. When he wasn't wrapped up with his birds and bees, he was often to be found, along with the handyman Brian, in the stables, where Peter looked after the horses.

Hannibal supposed he should simply be grateful to have maintained control as both Butler and Cook. The former as an excuse to remain close at young Will's side at all times, the latter owed to his unquestionable culinary skill. Even Will himself could not argue against the positions he held in the staff, though Hannibal tested him every step of the way. Once he'd sampled Hannibal's cooking, there's been no further discussion on that front.

Though Will seethed at the invasion of his space and privacy when Hannibal came into his room every morning to draw the curtains, and every evening to draw his bath--though he bristled at Hannibal's adjustments to his wardrobe and the touch of Hannibal's hand high on his back--Will had yet to snap under the strain.

It was impressive, especially from one so young. There had been dozens of men and women over the centuries, far older, more experienced and worldly, who'd folded after much shorter a time. They made their deals without fully considering the terms, and often times he claimed their souls ahead of schedule when, realising their folly, they surrendered to him. Perhaps they thought he would show them mercy.

Human beings got such amusing ideas into their tiny little brains.

Will, however, truly was exceptional. Hannibal had first spied a hint of it, over two years ago now, but every day Will blossomed more and more. Not only did he endure Hannibal's backhanded compliments and innuendo, but he maintained a calm facade when Hannibal purposefully and willfully misinterpreted his orders.

More than that, however, Will *pushed back*.

Hannibal should have known, from the very moment Will had chosen his name, that this child would be different.

"Anything I like?"

"Anything at all. You are the master of this design."

Sometimes, his masters had the notion they were clever, calling him David or Matthew, or some other Biblical appellation. And there were those who called him by the name of a dead family member, vainly hoping that he might fill the void they'd left behind. This boy, broken and bleeding, looked into his eyes as if he understood some secret, intrinsic part of the demon before him.

“Hannibal.”

‘Hannibal’ preened. He knew at once he’d made the right decision with this child. “Ah. The great Carthaginian general, the father of strategy.” It made sense, for a boy preparing to go to war on those who had wronged him.

But Will laid his head back on the straw floor and smiled dreamily, mind floating far away from the haze of loss and pain, and said, “I had a dog named Hannibal, once. Always close at heel, quick to follow my command. Fitting, wouldn’t you say?”

At every opportunity, Will delighted in defying Hannibal’s expectations of him. Whether by assigning Hannibal the most mundane or humiliating tasks, or with his insistence on forever adding to his menagerie of strays--going so far as allowing the most recent acquisition to sleep alongside him in the bed, Will gave as good as he got.

It was not only refreshing. Hannibal found himself enjoying this dance quite a bit. He would gladly endure whatever Will threw his way, whether it was minding Madame Red’s blundering moron of a butler, or working alongside a staff who regularly tried his patience.

As in this moment.

Hannibal surveyed the garden, fighting the urge to pinch the bridge of his nose. He was a millennia old demon. He’d faced far more trying instances than this. They weren’t coming to mind in this particular moment...

Takimoto-san would be arriving within the hour, and dinner was nearly ready. Hannibal had gone to check how the table setting was coming along, only to find it had yet to be moved into the colour garden.

Brian, who had been tasked with its relocation was instead sitting on the stairs leading down into the gravel walkway, munching on an apple. “It’s almost hypnotic,” he said, voice muffled around his mouthful. “I mean, once you get past the freakishness.”

“What,” Hannibal began, jaw clenched tight, “is he doing?”

Brian lifted his shoulders in shrug and took another sizeable chunk from his apple. ““Said he was taking the bees for a walk.”

Apparently, taking his bees for a walk entailed Jimmy encouraging them to swarm him as he strolled through the Elizabeth’s Garden, playing the piccolo. “The music keeps them calm,” Brian explained.

“There are three other gardens between here and the apiary, why he--” Hannibal took a centring breath and cleared his throat. “Mister Price.”

Jimmy turned to face him, or at least Hannibal assumed. He was nothing more than a vaguely human-shaped mass of writhing, gently humming bees. The piccolo came to rest at his side, but he didn’t speak. It occurred to Hannibal that to do so would put him at risk of having the bees climb inside.

“Perhaps you could relocate your colony to the butterfly garden?” Hannibal suggested. Will would likely be cross if he were to use his powers to smite any of the staff. Rarely did he feel the chafe of his leash under Will’s command and keenly as in that moment. “The bees would enjoy that far more, don’t you think?”

The head shape dipped as in agreement, and Jimmy began to shamble in that direction, resuming his musical accompaniment. Brian chuckled and chucked his apple core into the grass. He got to his feet and went to finishing setting up the table. “I’ll get it all squared away, boss.”

“See that you do, Mister Zeller,” Hannibal said, and glared pointedly in the direction of the apple core.

“Yeah, yeah,” Brian grouched, but went to retrieve his garbage.

“Our guest will be arriving shortly,” Hannibal informed him. “I’ll speak to Missus McClane about getting you some help. And please ensure the bees are entirely gone. I’d hate for them to put a sting on the evening.”

In the kitchen, the butter beans and field peas were finished, the golden beets and pork lardons sautéing on the stove under the watchful eye of his sous chef. Consommé had been simmering away the entire day. His special catch of the day had been skinned and cut into fillets, then rubbed in his special spice blend, ready to go on the grill.

Now was time to prepare the kickshaws--for guests who dined at the Graham estate, oysters had become something of a trademark, and were to be expected at every meal, in some form or another. Hannibal took great pride in finding new and inventive ways to prepare them so as not to bore his guests with the same recipes again and again.

Most discarded the meat of pearl oysters, preferring instead that of the rock oysters. Will appreciated the idea of using the whole creature--from the pearl, to its meat, to its shell. Hannibal appreciated the challenge of making the meat not only palatable, but delectable.

Tonight he sliced the meat in thin slivers, in the fashion of Japanese sashimi, then sprinkled in lemon juice and chili powder. Takimoto-san would appreciate the familiar presentation and the simple, elegant flavours.

“Smells delicious,” Will commented, strolling into the kitchen in his casual evening attire. Hannibal took a moment to appreciate the cut he’d chosen specifically to enhance the boy’s natural trim waist, narrow shoulders, and overall slimness. “But I suppose I shouldn’t expect anything else from you, Hannibal.”

Will came to stand at the centre counter, surveying the evening’s fare. Under Hannibal’s disapproving eye, he pinched a piece of oyster up in his fingers and conveyed it to his mouth, tongue flicking against skin in chase of the flavour. Hannibal waited, though Will’s response was as predicted. “Acceptable.”

Hannibal favoured him with a knowing look. “I made your excuses to your aunt,” he said, faintly scolding.

“Did she give you much trouble?”

“Half the way through her bottle of bourbon?” Hannibal asked, incredulous. “Matthew poured her in her carriage an hour ago.”

Even though his expression was sullen, and his appreciation grudging, Will muttered, “Thank you for handling that.”

“Of course, My Lord.” Hannibal dipped his head. “I have had the table set in Elizabeth’s Garden, as instructed. Do be on the lookout for any stray honeybees.”

“Oh?” Will arched a single brow, eyes sparkling in naked curiosity.

“A minor incident with Mister Price’s colony,” Hannibal said. “If any have lingered, I am certain he would prefer to remove them himself, rather than see them squashed. I’ve also uncorked a bottle of the ‘78 Sangiovese, if Your Lordship would care to sample it?”

“I’m sure it’s fine.” Will inhaled deeply. “Is that strawberry-rhubarb pie I smell?”

“Yes, My Lord.”

Will’s eyes fell closed. What a picture he made, lashes fanned black against his winter pale cheeks, rosy from the heat of the day, perfect cupid’s bow lips caught in a brief, honest smile. “Lovely,” he said, and Hannibal was helpless but to agree.

Then his eyes blinked open, and his smile melted into a faint smirk. “Though I do hope the rhubarbs are not so tough this time.”

Hannibal’s own smile was pained. There was little doubt that Will knew precisely the impact his words would have. He tongued the tip of a fang and bit back the poisonous words he could have said. “I harvested the stalks myself,” Hannibal informed him. He rested his hand on the counter beside Will’s soft and dainty in comparison, and leaned in close.

The room around them plunged into shadow, though it was still daylight outside. Hannibal pitched his voice low and let his gloved pinkie trail, whisper-light, along the outside of Will’s hand, eliciting a shiver. “They have just ripened, and are quite sweet and tender. Perhaps you would care to taste for yourself?”

“That’s quite alright, Hannibal,” Will said, with purposeful, casual arrogance. He straightened and tossed back his curls, met Hannibal’s gaze head-on. “I know a butler of your caliber is compelled to perform your duties as requested by his master.”

More delightful even than the game the two of them played was the promise of what was to come. Hannibal could play at obedience for now, anticipating the day when the tables would be turned. So he curled his lips and dipped his head in deference.

“As you say, My Lord.”

~*~

Will left the kitchen with a spring in his step and a smirk on his face, heading to greet their guest. Takimoto was an elderly man, who had been involved in pearling since his youth, where

he'd begun as a diver. Now stooped and half-blind, he was nonetheless cheerful, and eager to pass on his knowledge to Will.

"Takimoto-san!" Will met him in the parlour, bowing at the waist. "I'm sorry to have pushed back our meeting."

"Nonsense," Takimoto said. "Any excuse to sample more of your man Hannibal's cooking."

"Don't let him hear you saying as much," Will warned. "I'd hate for it to go to his head--his ego hardly needs the boost."

Takimoto laughed. "I take it your meeting with Lombardi-san went according to plan."

Will pursed his lips in annoyance, and then, remembering himself, reigned in the expression. Every day he strove to do away with childish expressions, but it proved more difficult than he'd expected.

"Unfortunately, Mister Lombardi and I did not see eye to eye on the operation," Will said. "I don't think we'll be hearing from him again."

"I'm sorry to hear it, My Lord," Takimoto said.

"No," Will said. "It is better this way. I am in possession the vulcanised suits now, and it gives me the opportunity to bring in someone who understands what it is I'm trying to achieve. Someone who, I hope, you would be willing to work alongside, to teach your methods of seeding the oysters."

"There are associates of mine who wish to secure a patent on their process. They won't be pleased with me for sharing it," Takimoto said.

"I'm not concerned with the profitability of it," Will said, frowning. "I only care for the safety of my workers."

Takimoto clapped him on the shoulder. "I know, my boy," he said. He was one of few in Will's life who could get away with such a thing. Indeed, Will took comfort from the familiar touch. "That is why I'm going to help you."

Will was suffused with honest gratitude. "We can discuss the details over dinner."

They made their way through the house and onto the patio, where the sun was just beginning to slide beneath the horizon. Past the fragrant herb garden, and the rose garden, where buds were just beginning to sprout on the stems. Beyond, the colour garden was in full, triumphant bloom.

Lady Betta had taken great pride in this garden above all others, and lovingly tended to it in her free time, and Will's father had honoured her efforts by naming it after her. In the spring, a variety of vivid flowers blossomed in all the shades of the rainbow. Blood red amaryllis and pink and crimson peonies; exotic sunset orange and royal purple birds of paradise; cheerful yellow sweet peas; dazzling blue crocus; fragrant lavender and hyacinth; delicate white freesia.

When Will walked in the garden, surrounded by the fruit of his mother's labour, and inhaled the familiar scents, he could almost feel her presence. Hovering just out of reach at his shoulder,

looking over him in fondness.

Will knew it was nothing more than a fantasy. If his mother's spirit did continue to exist after her death, and if she could see what had become of her son, he doubted it would be any pleasant emotion she felt for him any longer. He couldn't let such thoughts sour his mood, and so cast them aside as he took his seat.

Over the consommé they made small talk. Any hope of Takimoto not spoiling Hannibal with praise evaporated when he was presented with the oyster sashimi kickshaws. Will's butler was practically *glowing* with pride when he brought out the ginger lemon sorbet palate cleanser.

At last came the cobia, presented on the bed of peas and beans, drizzled in a bleu cheese succotash purée. As usual, Hannibal's presentation was almost too beautiful to eat. Will could sense Hannibal's anticipation; he was familiar with it by now. The perverse pleasure he took in watching while their unsuspecting guests dined on human flesh.

Mister Bancroft was the first to pay for his crimes. The easiest to trace, as his home had been host to the rituals; his old cellar transformed into Will's prison. Of course, it would have been too simple if Will had been able to use that information to trace the others. Bancroft had an abundance of wealth and was dreadfully dim-witted--the perfect combination for whoever had orchestrated this whole affair.

There were others Will could trace--the doctor, the professor, the young widow. One of them would provide him with the answers he sought. Bancroft had no information to give Will, but that didn't mean this wasn't a triumph. Will could take pleasure in meting out his punishment.

A portly man, Bancroft enjoyed the pleasures of the flesh, but if he prized any one sin above the others, it was gluttony. Though Will had starved under his care, the banquets he'd thrown for the other members of the society were always decadently catered. Twelve-course meals running late into the evening, wine flowing freely, as Will huddled chained in the corner, or laid bleeding on their stone dias.

It was with great, vengeful glee that Will watched as the man was compelled to eat himself to death. Hannibal presented him with sumptuous, never-ending feast, and every time it seemed as though he would finish his plate, more food appeared, steaming fresh.

When it was finished, Hannibal asked, "And what would you have me do with him now, My Lord?"

Will considered the remains, dispassionate. He'd watched all of Bancroft's numerous sins play out in the moments before his death. The man deserved no pity in life, and no memorial in death.

"Dispose of the body," he said. "Make it so that no one will ever find him."

The next day, Hannibal laboured in the sandy lakeshore from dawn, first digging a pit, and lining it with gravel and charcoal, then making a bed of hickory chips for the meat. The whole pig was buried and cooked in this manner, and Will invited all the workers to partake.

Hannibal merely watched, glowing with the praise laid at his feet, as every last piece was devoured. How avidly he'd awaited Will's first bite. The meat was succulent and tender, and Will had eaten until his stomach ached, it tasted so good.

In his room that evening, Will sat in his bed reading, while Hannibal fluttered about, putting away his clothing and tidying up. His butler was fairly vibrating with arrogance and amusement at the thought of having pulled the wool over his master's eyes. Time to remind him of his place.

"I suppose since Mister Bancroft conducted himself like a pig in life, he met a fitting end," Will said. He turned the page with feigned casualness.

Hannibal paused, halfway through the closet door, and gave Will a piercing look. "What's that, My Lord?"

Will stared back over the top of his book, unflinching. "That he be butchered like one, I mean."

Something flared into existence between them in that moment, hot, thick, and suffocating; something for which Will had no name yet. His stomach roiled as though he were going to be ill, but it was not an altogether unpleasant sensation. It only grew more intense as Hannibal swept to his bedside and knelt down, an expression akin to awe on his face.

The gaslight flickered, and Will could see the shadow cast behind Hannibal, of his crystalline antlers. Hannibal's palm was hot against Will's skin when he cupped his cheek. Though he remained in human form, Will could feel the sharp edge of one claw-tipped finger as it traced the dip of his chin. "I believe you will exceed my every expectation, dear boy,"

Will smiled, and once he started, he couldn't quite control how it grew, fierce and vicious. "Your previous masters must have set the bar rather low, then."

"Or are you simply that exceptional?" Hannibal murmured.

Will picked up his fork and speared a piece without preamble. It was a game, to poke and prod at Hannibal's sensibilities. A series of actions designed to burrow under his skin, until that calm demeanor gave way to a flash of annoyance, a sneer of derision, a snarl if Will was particularly good at needling him.

Always it was gone in an instant, the rippling surface smoothed as if it had never happened. Hannibal would reign in the monster that lurked under his surface. Smile and bow and murmur as you say, but Will remembered. He stored each one away in his mind with a feeling of smug satisfaction. Another point scored. Advantage Will.

The food was always superb, but Will didn't treat it with the proper reverence, as far as Hannibal was concerned. He could go on about the sacred transference of life and honouring all parts in some effort to appeal to Will's sense of frugality. The truth was that while Will's conscience was untroubled by his consumption of human flesh, he didn't share Hannibal's zeal for it, and so it was easy to tease him.

It was impressive how Hannibal could transform the texture and the taste of the meat. Not with his demonic abilities, but his expertise in the kitchen. Will didn't close his eyes in pleasure, but it was a close thing, the 'cobia' all but melting on his tongue, bursting with the flavour of the blended spices. Smokey paprika, the piney-mint tang of the thyme, and the fiery kick of the cayenne, mellowed by the creamy bleu cheese.

Across the table, Takimoto made a small sound of delight. "Hannibal-san, what would it take to sway your allegiance to your young master and take you back to Ise with me?"

Hannibal smiled. In the growing gloom of dusk, with the candlelight flickering off his angular features, Hannibal looked more like the beast Will had met in his cell than a man. "I spent some time in my youth in Kyoto. It was a beautifully peaceful estate where my mistress lived."

"Ah." Takimoto hummed in approval. "I was wondering where you learned how to make sashimi with such skill."

"I may have picked up a thing or two in my time there," Hannibal said. "However I'm afraid nothing you will say will convince me to leave Lord Graham. My obeisance to him can only be ended by death."

"My goodness!" Takimoto exclaimed. "You cannot buy such loyalty."

Mirth bubbled up inside Will. *If only he knew*. He leaned back in his seat, wineglass in hand, and said, "Oh, I'm certain if you could, most would find the price untenable." Hannibal was right; the sangiovese was the perfect pairing for the rich flavours of the cobia.

"Well, if I cannot have him for myself, I suppose I will have to secure this business deal with you, so I might have an excuse to continue to dine at your table."

Will tipped his glass and Takimoto picked up his own, bringing them together. "To a long and fruitful partnership," Will said, and the crystal clinked, ringing out through the garden. Hardly the most binding of the deals Will had made in his short life, but he was pleased, nonetheless.

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It was after ten when Takimoto left. Will was tired from the long day and a full stomach. Perhaps he shouldn't have had the second serving of pie, but he had a particular weakness for Hannibal's baking, and strawberry rhubarb was his favourite. If there was any perk at all to his youth, it was the ability to overindulge in sweets without raising any eyebrows.

The days were already growing hot, but the temperature had dropped in the hours since the sun had set. Hannibal awaited him in his bedroom, where he'd built a fire and turned back the sheets. Winston nudged affectionately at Will's hip as he brushed past and hopped up onto his half of the bed.

Hannibal scowled, but refrained from comment. Instead, he stepped forward to help Will from his jacket. Will brushed aside his hands after, undoing the buttons of his shirt himself, setting aside his cufflinks. He tossed the shirt aside and stepped out of his trousers, letting them fall in a pile on the floor. Hannibal swooped in to pick it up and shake the wrinkles free, sparing him a harried sideways glance.

"I take it dinner went according to plan?" Hannibal asked, passing into the closet as Will finished undressing. It was merely an illusion of privacy.

Will snatched his nightshirt from where it lay neatly across the sheets, and hurried to pull it on, tugging on the hem out of habit more than any hope for modesty.

"Takimoto-san will be heading to St Petersburg next week," he said. "I was thinking of sending Stephen with him." Stephen was only a few years older than Will himself, but a skilled diver, like his father before him.

“To take Mister Lombardi’s place?” Hannibal asked. He followed Will into the bathroom, hovering at his side as Will washed his face with a damp cloth.

“I am certain of Stephen’s loyalty, and as a diver, I can trust he will do what is best for the safety of the men beneath him.” Will needn’t explain nor defend his choices to Hannibal.

“Stephen is an excellent choice,” Hannibal murmured.

There was no reason for the words to cause a thrill in Will’s chest. He didn’t need Hannibal’s approval, yet it warmed him all the same. He took the toothbrush, covered in cleaning powder that Hannibal offered him and muttered his thanks.

It was great relief that he slipped between his sheets that night, and a feeling of accomplishment. Perhaps Lombardi wasn’t one of those responsible for what had happened that fateful night two years ago, but all the same, the world was a better place without him. There was a voice like his mother’s wondering what had become of her sweet, sensitive little boy, but Will ignored it until at last sleep claimed him.

A Trap is Laid

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Will made a habit of reading the paper each morning, scanning the headlines for anything out of the ordinary. Jack contacted him when he felt the situation warranted it, but there were times when he did not recognise the necessity of Will's intervention. Below the fold on the third page was the story of another suicide.

A florist this time, in his mid-fifties, married with five children. The paper did not go into the details, but Will's curiosity was piqued; he'd have to ask his aunt about it, the next time she came to visit. Or perhaps the author of the article herself would have some information for him.

"What do you think?" He folded over the paper to the story and tossed it on the table.

Hannibal paused in the process of tidying up the remains of breakfast and leaned over to skim the passage. "There is far too little detail to say for certain. But then, I have come to trust your instinct in such things. Would you like to research it further?"

Will waved a hand. "Later. Freddie and Frederick are coming this afternoon."

The expression of distaste on Hannibal's face was quickly masked, but Will felt much the same way, himself. He would wonder why it was that Jack insisted on working with the two of them, but Freddie was, despite her many flaws, a brilliant investigator. And Frederick and all his connections and smarmy charm greased many wheels and opened many doors.

"How could I forget?" Hannibal murmured, and Will favoured him with a smirk. He couldn't help the spark of fondness he felt for Hannibal in that moment, but stamped down on it ruthlessly. It did him no good to forget Hannibal's nature, nor that of their deal.

"No doubt Madame Red will be making an appearance as well." She always found an excuse when she knew Will was working a case, whether out of interest in the crime, or out of some concern over his well-being, he couldn't precisely say. "And Frederick is bringing Missus Autrey and Mister Rabenstein along. To air their grievances, presumably."

The details of the meeting had honestly slipped his mind, having received the note from Freddie the previous afternoon, shortly before Madame Red's appearance. He had not intentionally left it to the last minute to inform Hannibal of the extra guests. It was merely a side-benefit of his absentmindedness, seeing Hannibal dismayed and flustered as he fled toward the kitchen to prepare a suitable spread for tea.

Arthur Tier showed up as well, having heard tell of the meeting from Autrey or Rabenstein. Will knew they did it to make him squirm, but he wouldn't give them the pleasure. He kept his smile coolly pleasant and welcomed Tier in with the others, noting how the man's eyes flitted about with interest, drinking in every detail, storing it away for later reflection. Ever the detective, Tier. No doubt he thought by catching Will off-guard he could find some reason for having him dismissed from Jack's service.

Regardless of the short notice, tea was a splendid affair. There was a variety of dainty sandwiches--jambon et langue, cucumber, salmon and dill--alongside baked clams, currant scones, and a chocolate raspberry meringue cake topped with fresh whipped cream and berries. The tea was a lapsang souchong with smokey pine fragrance and the bite of whisky flavour on the finish.

"Splendid tea, Hannibal," Chilton remarked, on his second cup of it. "And this sandwich--is that actual tongue? Fabulous." Hannibal nodded his head agreeably, and Chilton turned to Will. "Always the most unexpectedly delightful meals at your home, Lord Graham."

Freddie made a face at the sandwich she'd been about to bite into and set it aside, none too subtly rubbing her fingers on her napkin. "Yes, delightful," she echoed, mouth pulled thin. "I don't mean to be rude--"

"That would be a first," Will remarked, barely glancing up from the notes she'd presented him upon her arrival. She'd been surveilling the warehouses on the dock. There was some suspicious activity regarding the regular boats from Italy--immigrants on their way to South America, and late night movement of goods from one warehouse to another.

Of course, there was no proof linking any of that directly to the criminal organisation operating under the name The Black Hand. So called for the mark on the letters they sent to threaten, blackmail, and extort. A dagger suspended over the drawing of a hand coloured in black.

“But we’re here to discuss the gang activity down by the pier,” she continued on, eyes narrowed in his direction. “Jack’s growing restless with the lack of movement on that front, and I have to say, he’s not the only one. This latest incident, with the missing opium shipment, only shows they’re not afraid to escalate things.”

Missus Autrey took advantage of his silence to give her two cents. “I don’t understand why the police aren’t handling this on their own,” she said, eyes cutting towards Tier.

“Trust me, Madam,” Tier said, lips in a severe line under his thick moustache, “if it were up to me, that would certainly be the case.”

Silently fuming until this point, Rabenstein sat down his teacup and sauce. The china looked absurdly small next to his giant hands. “I don’t know how we can expect a *spoiled child* to remedy things,” he grumbled. “I have listened to Mister Chilton so far. But now, as if the continued petty burglary and defacement of our property weren’t enough, they’ve begun to extort us!”

“Now this theft of the opium shipment--it’s a bold move,” Autrey said, “And it only goes to show Lord Graham’s inability to handle this situation.”

Will watched them from the corner of his eye, chin resting indolently in his palm. He was already bored of this meeting, and that was saying something. Madame Red glanced between the two of them and Will, as if anticipating how he might respond to being referred to as a child. Probably because it wasn’t too very different from her own reaction to being dismissed as merely a woman.

“Miss Lounds, Mister Rabenstein,” she murmured, in that way of hers that managed to subdue even the most unruly patient. “Perhaps if you were to listen to Will’s plan before disparaging his work, you might find he has addressed your concerns.”

The assembled company turned to Will with expectant expressions on their face, and Will straightened in his seat, rolling back his shoulders. “And what, pray, have you learned of these criminals, Mister Tier?”

“We have increased foot patrols in the waterfront district, and have men surveilling the warehouses. We will catch those responsible soon enough,” Tier said.

“I haven’t invited you here today to provide you with an progress report.” Will fixed his gaze on Tier, speaking for his benefit. He stood, forcing them to all look up at him for a change. “To be frank, I am neither required nor inclined to share that sort of information with any of you.”

Tier bristled, and Chilton gave a nervous chuckle, leaning forward in his seat. “Now, Lord Graham,” he hemmed, “You must understand the anxiety of Missus Autrey and Mister Rabenstein--and indeed all those who depend on the secure transportation of their goods through the docks.”

Will knew how it chafed for Chilton to feign deference towards him. The wounded pride that Jack was forever listening to Will rather than himself, despite his years of education and experience. The unfairness inherent in Will having been born with a title while Chilton struggled to climb the social ladder. Will didn’t despise Chilton, in the way he did Freddie Lounds. He pitied him, instead, and that kept him from lashing out at the man.

“When one is sniffing out vermin, one must exercise patience.” Will ran his hand along the back of Rabenstein’s chair as he passed. “Perhaps Mister Tier and his men could charge in, but they would scatter. He may catch one or two, but the rest will slip away. I don’t intend to strike until the trap is laid. Then I can take them all at once.” He met each of their eyes in turn. “You can rest assured of that.”

In the wake of his statement, Rabenstein, Autrey, and Freddie all started talking overtop one another. The two businesspeople threatening to take action on their own, Freddie going on about how unprofessional Will was being, Tier blustering about his lack of qualifications. Chilton, ever the peacemaker, began to use a soothing tone, appealing to them, and Madame Red took another swig of her doctored tea.

It was funny, even being the cause of the current heated argument, how quickly everyone forgot about his presence. Where Will was concerned, it was just as well. He had all the information in the form of Freddie’s notes and the key to the storehouse Chilton had provided him.

With their attention split, it was easy for Will to slip from the room unnoticed by all save Hannibal, who cast him an amused, if somewhat irked expression. Or so he’d thought. Trust Tier

to split his attention in order to keep an eye on him. “Lord Graham!” he called across the foyer, when Will had reached the grand staircase.

Will paused, hand on the bannister, and turned to grant Tier his profile. He arched an expectant brow. “If you know something we don’t, it is your duty as a civilian to share that information with the police force.”

“But I’m not a civilian, Mister Tier,” Will said, turning more fully to face him. “We both know if you had any authority over me, it would be the end of mine and Jack’s involvement in police affairs, but here we are.”

“Jack Crawford isn’t the cause of my concern,” Tier barked. “Every case you’ve worked on has ended in unnecessary violence, and it’s only escalating. You’re a menace.”

Will took one step further down the stairs, pitching his voice low so as not to carry. “If you and your men worked a bit more diligently, perhaps you might beat me to the finish line now and then. Once you’ve become less inept at your job, then you may presume to tell me how to do mine.”

Tier stormed across the marble floor, fuming, and Will regarded him with an expression of supreme disinterest. “I’m watching you,” he said. “Every move you make, just waiting. When you slip up, I’ll be there, and I’ll see to it that you’re put out of commission.”

“Very good, Mister Tier,” Will said. He pointed imperiously towards the front door. “Until then, please do see yourself out of my home.”

After Tier had gone, slamming the door behind him, Will trod up the stairs and to his room. A few moments later, there was a rap on his door before Hannibal entered unbidden. “I take it you got what you needed from the meeting?”

Will slipped a hand in his front vest pocket and pulled the key out far enough for Hannibal to see. “Chilton has moved the shipment to the agreed upon location; the bait has been set. Now we must simply wait.”

Honest, savage delight lit up Hannibal's eyes, making them glow bright red in the sunlight. His butler did so love the hunt, ever hungering for the souls Will allowed him. "And your guests, My Lord."

"Oh, I'm sure you can make my excuses for me. Afterall, aren't you always going on about your superior skill as a butler? Certainly that falls under your purview." Will arched his brow and pressed his tongue to his lip, teasing.

"As you say." Hannibal bowed on his way out, but paused halfway through the door. "I noticed you barely touched your tea."

Will groaned, flopping down face first on the bed. Winston, dosing there, lifted his head briefly before settling down again, right by Will's hand. "Any appetite I had fled the moment Freddie opened her mouth," he mumbled. He ran his hand through the long fur around Winston's neck, and already some of the tension was bleeding from his shoulders.

"I could bring it to you, My Lord, if you desire. I haven't even begun dinner, and I'd hate for you to have that late afternoon sinking feeling."

Will rolled onto his back, head pillowed against Winston's side, and stared up at the canopy above his head. It was strange when Hannibal showed concern for his well-being, outside the bounds of the deal. Likely he saw it as fulfilling his role as butler, and Hannibal was nothing if not a consummate professional. All the same, it made Will's stomach twist, and he couldn't decide if it was a pleasurable sensation, or not.

"Sir?"

"Yes, very well," Will snapped, stirred from his thoughts. He cast a piercing look at Hannibal, but there was nothing to see in those crimson eyes. "Bring it up."

Once Hannibal was gone, Will heaved a sigh of relief. He kicked off his shoes and tossed his jacket over the foot of the bed. He would be dining alone tonight; there was no one to impress. The ends of his tie were left to dangle loose from around his neck, and the top couple buttons of his shirt undone.

Today was not as stiflingly hot as the rest of the week--the milder weather of the spring was returning, but still it felt nice to unwind. He didn't know how long he lay there, absently petting Winston, before a knock sounded on his door. A second passed, and then another, and Will frowned in the direction of the door.

Unless Will had been careful to explicitly order him not to, Hannibal always entered his room without waiting for Will's response. His way of exerting some measure of control over the situation, same with the tailoring of Will's clothing, and his elaborate menus.

Another knock sounded, and Will snapped, frustrated, "Oh just come in already," getting to his feet to answer the door himself. Maybe Hannibal didn't have a free hand with the tea trolley. He'd just reached out for the doorknob when several things happened at once--Winston rose from his slumber and leapt to the floor, a whining growl in the back of his throat, his hackles rising. Will turned to him in concern, half crouching, and the door swung open with great force, knocking him the rest of the way to the floor.

In the doorway was a stocky man, dressed as a labourer. His newspaper was pulled down low over his head, shading his eyes, but Will recalled seeing him around the docks before. Winston barked once sharply before Will got a hand on his collar and tugged him down with a sharp hushing sound.

"My employer wants a word with you," the man said, in what he no doubt thought was a menacing tone. He could hardly be blamed for the fact that Will had encountered far worse.

"Let me guess," Will muttered, "are you in Missus Autrey's employ, or Mister Rabenstein's?" He watched as the man pulled a bottle from his pocket and doused a rag with the liquid. The bottle bore a very distinct label. "Ah, the apothecary. I must admit, I was leaning the other way, though I suppose Missus Autrey would have the connections to move the product."

"That's enough talking from you," the man growled, and lunged for him.

Will wouldn't have put up much of a fight--after all, things were going according to plan. But then Winston attacked, biting down on the man's arm hard enough to draw blood, and the man swung him hard against the wall with a thud and a whimper. Will cried out against the rag over

his mouth, breathing deeply of the ether, and struggled for all he was worth, but it was no use. Around him, the room bled into black.

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Through the bond they shared, Hannibal was always vaguely aware of Will's presence. Stronger with closer proximity, he could sense if Will was hungry or tired, scared or angry or lonely, annoyed by Hannibal's attention, or beset by burgeoning arousal. At a further distance he could at least discern Will's general state of mind, and whether he was awake or asleep.

It allowed him to choose the perfect moment every morning to enter the young lord's room. Even if Will thought he did it to cause discomfort, Hannibal could sense when his deep, restful sleep ended, and could always enter between cycles, and therefore choose the opportune moment to wake him naturally.

As he was downstairs tending to the guests, he could sense Will deep in thought with a hint of confusion, both overpowered by a wave of deep relaxation. Therefore he was unsurprised to feel Will slip into unconsciousness a short while later. What was strange was how silent and still his mind became after.

Frowning, Hannibal abandoned the tidying process of the aftermath of tea, and headed up the stairs. Now that he focussed on their bond, he could feel other changes. Will felt much too far away. Hannibal hastened his steps, entering the bedroom without knocking. Blood stained the carpet in fine droplets, a chair was tipped on its side, and Winston lay unmoving on his side.

Hannibal's first priority was keeping the vow he'd made Will, which ensured his safety, among other things. However, it would be a lie to say that he did not feel the faintest stirrings of concern over the boy's well-being. Unexpected, and altogether unpleasant, he shoved them aside and concentrated.

First, to see to Winston. Hannibal had a particular disdain for dogs--smelly, hairy, drooling creatures, and far too loud. Cats, with their sleek coats and aloof superiority, were far more to his liking. But this creature was less offensive than most of his species, calmer and quieter, an almost supernatural awareness in the way he looked after his human. He held a special place in Will's heart, and Hannibal could appreciate the comfort Winston provided. Warmth, familiarity, unconditional love. Three things that were sorely lacking in Will's life.

The dog's breathing was laboured, and Hannibal touched a hand to the thick, golden-red fur of his stomach, allowing his power to pass between them. It was unnatural for a demon such as himself to use his powers to heal, but it was no beyond his abilities. Winston awoke with an anxious, growling bark, and Hannibal soothed his hand between Winston's eyes and around his ear.

"Don't worry," Hannibal assured him, and stood with a final pat on his head. "I will bring home our master alive and well shortly."

With every moment, Will drew further and further away, but there was no where on the earth they could take him that Hannibal could not and would not follow, and Hannibal had all his power at his disposal. Slipping free his hand from its glove, Hannibal allowed the seal carved into the skin on the palm of his hand call out to its mate. Magic pulsed between them, and Hannibal followed the tug of it.

Moving more quickly than the human eye could process, he sped from the house, their bond as his guide. He was unsurprised when it led him in the general direction of the waterfront, given Will's current case.

There were a number of armed men lurking around the warehouse where the opium had originally been stored, keeping guard. In his current form, Hannibal couldn't make himself invisible, but he could blend into the shadow, drawing it around him like a cloak. Here his seal throbbed dully with the beat of Will's heart, sluggish, but slowly building--he was regaining consciousness.

Hannibal waited until one man rounded the corner, leaving the other alone, before springing forward. The man barely had a moment to look surprised before Hannibal snapped his neck and threw him out of sight, under the dock. He leapt neatly to the ledge surrounding the second floor and listened carefully to the movement from within.

"If you killed my dog," Will's voice carried through wood and stone, rugged, hoarse, and quiet with rage, "I will murder you with my bare hands."

A man chuckled. "You know, I'm almost tempted to cut you loose, just to watch you try."

Will snarled fiercely, and something in Hannibal's chest--where his heart would be if he had one--gave a pleasant leap. "You wouldn't dare act without orders from your master," Will said, and that gave Hannibal a moment's pause. Was it possible the words were meant for him? Could Will know he was there, listening?

There was the sound of skin on skin, ringing from the force of it, and fabric ripping, and just like that, Hannibal could feel Will's seal much more keenly. He'd provoked the man into attacking him, tearing his shirt, splitting it down the back to expose Hannibal's mark.

"Clever boy," Hannibal murmured, cheek to the stone façade. And oh, was this what affection felt like?

Now, when Hannibal closed his eyes, he could clearly see the room where Will was being held. Empty crates, a desk covered in scattered papers, a bookshelf with all the contents spilled on the floor. Two men outside the door, one man inside, Will bruised and bound, slumped against the wall. Even with a black eye and blood trickling down for the corner of his mouth, he was uncowed. He watched his captor, unimpressed. His pride of the boy only increased.

Heeled boots clicked on the wooden floor. Down the hall, stopping before the door. A familiar woman--tall and very slender, with olive skin and sleek black hair. Missus Autrey brushed past guards on her way into the room. "That's enough, Carlo."

Will lifted his head to glare at her. "I realise I was a terribly rude host, leaving as I did this afternoon," he said, "but this retaliation seems a bit excessive."

Autrey squatted down before him, meeting his expression with a smirk. "Such sass." She smacked Will's cheek, not enough to truly hurt, but enough for him to feel it. "I suppose that comes from not having a mother around to properly raise you."

Hannibal bared his teeth in impotent fury. Until Will ordered otherwise, he was stuck here. There was no use pretending the order to remain still hadn't been meant for him. The seal knew the truth and Hannibal was bound by it.

“If you are suggesting you could possibly fill the role, I have to tell you I’d prefer to go without,” Will drawled.

Ever the keen hunter, Will had ferreted out some old hurt and purposefully crafted his words to drive the pain deeper. Autrey let out a low hiss from between her teeth and stood, towering over him.

“I have no interest in playing games with a child,” she said. “I know it wasn’t The Black Hand that took the opium.”

“Of course not,” Will agreed. “It must have been quite a surprise when they showed up for the merchandise, only to find it missing.”

Autrey’s lips twisted up in disgust. “Very good. And how did your carefully laid trap work out for you, Lord Graham?” she asked, spreading her hands wide to encompass his current situation.

Will arched one fine brow. “I promised I wouldn’t strike until I could take out the entire organisation in one fell swoop, and here you’ve obligingly brought all your men to one place this evening.”

“Little boy,” Autrey said, and laughed in delight, “you’re tied up and Carlo has a gun to your head--how do you think this is going to end for you.”

“With you, bloody on the floor.” Will tossed his head back, curls flopping over his brow. “I imagine right now my butler is taking your men out one by one.”

There it was, the invitation Hannibal had been waiting for. He sprung into action at once. Beneath him, two men had just passed on another in their rounds. He dropped down into the narrow space between them, barely displacing the air, and struck out, hands through their backs, gripping tight around their hearts and yanking them out still beating through bone and muscle and gristle.

“Hannibal?” Autrey laughed again, longer this time. Hannibal’s attention was split, but he could still hear them as he tore his way around and through the building. “Is he going to serve them

poisoned tartlets?”

“Oh, Hannibal wouldn’t do that to the food,” Will scoffed. “Though perhaps he’ll serve your tongue for tea tomorrow.”

That gave the woman a moment’s pause. Hannibal made his way into the main space on the first floor, where men were ripping the lids off crates of silk and rice and tea. Distracted as they were, and unsuspecting of an enemy in their midst, it was easy for Hannibal to dispatch them, even though they were armed. Clean and efficient, he broke their necks.

In the throes of death, one managed to squeeze off a single round from his pistol. It just missed Hannibal’s side, cutting instead through his tailcoat. More than the fact that the shot had attracted the attention of everyone in the warehouse, Hannibal was annoyed at having ruined a perfectly tailored piece of clothing. His claws ripped the dying man’s throat out to show his displeasure.

Chaos ensued. Hannibal now had the full attention of the dozen or so men left alive. They wasted no time in turning their weapons on him, and soon the warehouse was filled with smoke and smelled of cordite--sharp acetone with the subtle hint of sweetness--and the heady coppery scent of spilled blood.

He danced between the bullets, dodging each one with ease, sliding neatly to his knees beneath the liquid trail they cut through the air. Three of the men very courteously dispatched of one another for him with their careless aim, the bullets crossing through the space where he’d been a split second before, and onward to a different target.

A crowbar lay discarded among the crates. Hannibal snatched it up and used it to sweep the feet from beneath the closest target. Before he’d even landed, Hannibal had driven the hooked end of the crowbar into his skull. Another man charged him and Hannibal rose to meet him, twisting his head halfway around on his neck with one fluid movement.

The remaining men began to panic and scatter, but Hannibal could not allow them to escape. Hurling the crowbar with precision, he pinned one man to the wall through his chest and spared a moment’s pity for the fact that he couldn’t simply watch the show as the man tried to free himself and inevitably hastened his own death when he succeeded.



Alas, there was work to be done, and upstairs Autrey and her man Carlo had been alarmed by the gunfire. Hannibal could hear them, Carlo sending the men at the door to investigate, Autrey hissing threats at Will. The trite methods of torture she would employ against him to extract information.

Hannibal sneered as he dragged his nails across the throat of the man before him and narrowly avoided the ensuing bloodspray. As if such things would work on *his* master. Will Graham was made of stronger stuff than that.

Will finally called out, his voice ringing with power through the space between them, “Stop playing with your food and come and get me.”

With a gesture of his finger, Hannibal sent the gun flying from the hands of the man before him. Another gesture and the bones of the man’s legs crumbled, sending him screaming and writhing to the floor. Hannibal crushed his skull under his heel as he passed. As he made his way up the stairs, his eyes flared, and the hearts of the remaining five men simply stopped beating.

In the sudden, shocking silence that followed, Hannibal’s footsteps sounded out on the staircase. “Go see,” Autrey barked.

Hannibal was so focussed on what was happening inside the room, he was caught off guard as he rounded the bend in the hall. One of the guards remained outside the door, and fired two bullets into Hannibal’s chest. He fell crumpled to the ground, just as Carlo came out to investigate, and he let out a triumphant sound.

“A lot of good your *butler* did you,” Carlo said, coming over to kick Hannibal in the side, rolling him onto his back. He grinned down at Hannibal and levelled his gun at his head.

Will let out a long-suffering sigh. “Whenever you’re done fooling around, I would appreciate being untied.”

“As you say, My Lord,” Hannibal wheezed, around the blood gurgling in his lungs.

Carlo barked out a laugh and pulled the trigger. The bullet hovered midair, scant inches from Hannibal's forehead. He saw the moment of recognition on Carlo's face, that the bullet had *stopped*, eyes widening in disbelief and then fear as the bullet rotated to point towards him instead. Hannibal raised a fist and flicked his fingers open wide, sending it flying. The bullet caught the man right between his wide eyes.

While Autrey and her remaining guard stood frozen with shock, Hannibal rose to his feet. He forced the bullets in his body back out the way they'd come. Skin organs, blood vessels, and flesh healed as they fell clattering to the ground, leaving his body whole and uninjured again, though this shirt would never be the same. He pursed his lips in distaste and stepped over Claro's body.

The guard cowered, and though Hannibal appreciated when one was able to acknowledge they were outmatched, he could not spare him. Even if Will hadn't ordered it, this offence was not one he could allow to go unpunished. At least he could be quick, stopping his heart in his chest as he passed.

Autrey scrambled for a gun on the nearby table and grabbed Will by the hair. She jerked him to her and he didn't so much as yelp in pain, though Hannibal could read it in the lines around his eyes and the thin, bloodless press of his lips.

"If you come any closer I'll kill him," Autrey said. Her eyes were wild, flicking over Hannibal and back at Will, desperately trying to come to grips with what she'd seen and regain the upper hand.

Hannibal ignored her in favour of assessing his master. Bruised and battered, but Will was more put out than anything else--his pulse wasn't even elevated all that much. "Are you well, My Lord?"

"Growing bored," Will said, "but otherwise unscathed."

Autrey made a strange noise in the back of her throat and pulled his hair back sharply, drawing his neck taut. The barrel of her pistol dug into the hollow beneath his chin. "Did you hear me? I'll *kill* him!"

“Did you mean what you said?” Hannibal asked, eyes on Will’s, head tilted to the side in curiosity. “I can take her tongue?”

Will huffed a sigh. “Take whatever parts you like. *After* you release me.”

“They whisper things about the two of you--Chilton, Lounds--but you’re sicker even than they’ve realised,” Autrey said, and pulled the trigger.

There was the sound and the spark and the scent of gunfire. Then again, and again, Autrey’s panic mounting when there was no apparent effect on Will. She pulled the trigger until the chamber was empty, and then kept pulling. Hannibal held out his hand, palm up, and tipped it to the side, letting the six bullets fall and scatter across the ground. He crossed the room and knelt down before them both, inhaling deeply the scent of fear and panic wafting up from Autrey. It smelled delicious.

“Rude, indulging in idle gossip,” Hannibal remarked softly. “I was just going to stop at your tongue. Perhaps your heart, but no...” With a gesture, he broke both her arms. She fell to the floor away from Will, screaming wordlessly.

While she lay writhing in agony, Hannibal scooped Will up in his arms, holding the small form close to his chest. The human body was so delicate, and a child’s even more so. Fragile skin barely containing all that hot blood coursing beneath. How easy to tear and crush and absolutely destroy in a matter of seconds.



Often Hannibal found he had to restrain himself from doing that very thing. He pitied weakness, at best, and was disgusted by it at worst. Whether it was their bond, or something else yet undetermined, Will provoked an entirely different response. A desire to protect, to comfort, to restore to whole. To reassure Will, and himself, of the boy's well-being.

There was a possessiveness, of course--Will's soul belonged to him, and Hannibal would not allow another to take what was rightfully his. But he could not lie to himself. These were not the perfunctory actions of one coolly detached from the situation. With a gentle embrace, and soft, yielding flesh under Hannibal's searching hands as he undid the bindings.

"Winston--" Will began, and Hannibal was quick to reassure him.

"He is unharmed, and anxiously awaits your return."

Will rested his forehead briefly against Hannibal's shoulder and held still until Hannibal was finished untying him. His shivering abated when Hannibal shrugged free of his tailcoat and wrapped it around the boy's slight frame. His breathing went from shaky to steady within a few moments, Hannibal's hand passing up and down his back once, reassuringly, before they parted from one another. Their eyes met, and Will read the question in Hannibal's without him needing to say a word.

"I meant what I said," Will murmured. "*Whatever* you like."

Hannibal stared at him, transfixed, and not for the first time, he questioned who truly was master between them. Then he dipped his head--in thanks, in deference--and rose.

As he turned toward Autrey, the room grew darker around them. The human skin he wore began to melt away like so much black smoke, leaving him in his true form. Thorny spines grew from his skin, crystalline growths sprouted up, a dull, hollow grey in his hunger. Antlers branched up and out, thick enough to block out the light from the windows. His hooves clacked on the floor as he approached Autrey, who cowered away from him.



“You see, dining on human flesh is enjoyable.” Hannibal’s true voice fell heavy and slick between them. It did not possess the same echoing vibrancy of a human’s. “But it does not sustain me. Would you like to know what does?”

Autrey was pale-faced in her pain, faintly green around the edges, and trembling, but she spat in his face when Hannibal drew close. “Do your worst,” she hissed. He chuckled and flicked his tongue out, the breath from her lungs flavouring the air.

“You really should be careful what you say,” Hannibal told her. He took her chin in hand and drew her face up to his. Though she struggled, her strength was no match for his own, and he covered her mouth with his own, and he sucked, drawing her very soul from her body.

Much like a physical form, it fought him, clinging to the body it inhabited. Bit by bit, he swallowed it down and felt it becoming a part of him, trapped in his crystals. This soul was not cultivated specifically for him, over years. It would not satisfy him in the way taking his masters’ had before, and taking Will’s would, in the future. But it would hold him over, for a time, this soul and dozens of others, until Will’s was ripe for the taking.

When he had finished, Autrey’s body fell as if lifeless to the floor. Her heart would continue to beat, her lungs continue to breathe, but the body was nothing more than an empty husk. Hannibal started at the feel of warm fingers against the crystals on his back. He glanced over his shoulder, watching as Will traced one, now throbbing a deep purple from the soul trapped within.

“Is this what will become of me, when the time comes?” Will asked.

Hannibal turned, struck anew at the lack of fear and revulsion from the boy, even in this form. “Your soul will fill far more than one crystal,” he said. “My body will struggle to contain you, and you will sustain me for decades.”

Will glanced at Autrey’s body, and *there* was a flicker of fear. “Don’t worry, dear boy.” Hannibal dragged a claw gently down his cheek, bringing Will’s eyes back to his own. “When I’m finished with you, there will be nothing left.”

Will nodded, jaw set. “Good.” He reached out to drape his arms around Hannibal’s shoulders, a drowsy weakness overtaking him. “Now take me home,” he ordered.

Hannibal gathered him close, as he gathered in the light and shadow around them, drawing back the outer shell of pink human skin. Will was an insubstantial weight in his arms, huddled close to his chest as they passed through the bloody ruins of the warehouse. He’d have to call Jack about sending someone to clean up the mess.

“It’s too bad Tier failed so spectacularly following through on his threat,” Will said.

Hannibal granted him a curious look, head tipped to the side in that way that was a clear mimicry of human expression he didn’t entirely understand. “And what threat was that?” There was an underlying menace in his words, a sinister lilt aimed at Arthur Tier.

Will shrugged, as much as he was able in Hannibal’s arms, dismissive. “Only that he would be watching my every step, waiting for me to slip and fall. He might have finally gotten one up on me, if only he’d kept his word.”

Outside, early evening spread across the ocean in bright orange and red, fading into pale pinks and purples overhead. Hannibal heaved a sigh and said, “I must apologise, My Lord, for failing so utterly at my duties.”

Will lifted his head from Hannibal’s chest to stare at him in bleary confusion. “What on earth are you talking about?” he demanded.

“The hour is growing quite late, and I’m afraid I did not have an opportunity to prepare your dinner.” Hannibal bowed his head in shame.

Will snorted and thumped the heel of his hand against Hannibal’s shoulder to show his displeasure. “I swear, sometimes,” he said, “it seems as though you enjoy playing butler far too much.” He broke off with a yawn and slumped back against Hannibal again, nuzzling into the hollow of his throat. “I’m sure a tray of leftovers from tea will suffice.”

Normally Hannibal would put up more of a fight, insisting on proper meal full of the necessary nutrients for a growing boy. And Will would make bitter, pointed comments about the lack of growth evident in him. Just another small way for him to act out in the battle of wills between them.

Tonight, however, with all that had occurred, Hannibal found he was disinclined to put up a fight. “As you say, My Lord. Let’s get you home.”

~*~

Will took the weekend to recuperate, and by Monday morning the bruises on his face were mostly faded. There remained the pale purple shading under his eye and across his cheek, a slightly swollen upper lip, but if he arranged his hair carefully, it looked like nothing more than shadow. The bruises on his body were darker, and tender when he accidentally knocked into something. His clothing entirely obscured those from view, at least, but he had to carry himself with care to avoid causing further discomfort.

Anyway, there was work to be done, and he could not continue to laze in bed, licking his wounds. Hannibal stirred some white powder into his morning coffee that took the edge off the pain, and Will didn’t question what it was. After breakfast he was able to make the rounds of the plantation.

Jimmy and Brian were a pleasant diversion, arguing over the location for the digging of the new sewage pipes to be installed for ease of waste removal. The old lines, installed just before the fire that had killed his parents were hardly the best made or maintained, but the new lines would apparently run too close to the copse of ancient oaks to the northeast of the property.

“The roots are going to foul everything up,” Brian complained, tracing over the route on the sketch. “We need to dig them up.”

Jimmy shot him a sidelong look, lips twisted in annoyance. “Those trees are older than our presence on this continent. You can’t just dig them up for shits and giggles.”

Brian, who’d already opened his mouth to argue the point, closed it with a snap. He covered his face with one hand, but Will had already seen the smile he’d attempted to hide.

“Why can’t we simply move the sewage lines here?” Will asked, drawing an alternate route that swung wide, further south and east. He wouldn’t see the trees dug up. They were indeed magnificent to look at, long, gnarled branches reaching up and draping low to the ground in elegant lines, creating a shady haven from the glaring sun, no matter the time of day.

Brian shook his head. “No good.” He tapped a spot on the map. “You run the risk of contaminating the water table. And down here you’re too close to the Cooper’s workshop. You need the shortest route, and this is it. You start winding it around, you’re just asking for problems.”

“Well, we need the sewage lines, and I won’t have you digging up the oaks, so I trust the two of you will come up with some suitable alternative.” Will left them, listening as their bickering rose up behind him, and made his way on to the stables.

Peter had suffered an injury in Will’s youth, and at the time there had been some discussion of letting him go. Will was infinitely grateful that his father had kept him on. Gentle and kind, Peter was far better suited to his job now than ever before.

The horses were docile as he groomed them, brushing them down, cleaning their hooves, brushing flies away from their eyes, and putting out fresh food and water. All the while keeping up a running dialogue with them, and it certainly did seem as though he was receiving an answer from them in the pauses he left. Will found it fascinating to watch--as easily as he could read humans, something about Peter’s injury had opened him up in the same way to animals.

It wasn’t just the horses, either. There was the rat, Kevin, always poking his head from Peter’s front pocket, and the squirrel that he’d rescued as a baby who liked to scamper around the stables, but never too far from Peter’s side, scaling his pant leg to climb up his back and drape across his neck like a stole, or the mated pheasants who wandered through the yard nearby, coming in to roost in the stable each night, despite having no restraints.

Today Peter was eager to show off his newest friend to Will. A small starling called Sarah that perched delicately on Peter’s shoulder, to join the menagerie of birds and rodents he kept in his rooms above the stable. She tolerated Will’s attention, even going so far as to shift her perch to Will’s hand briefly, tiny, strong talons gripping his fingers as he stroked his fingers over her soft, inky blue-black feathers. One wing was wrapped in white bandage, made of one of Peter’s shirts, no doubt.

“There was a fox after her,” Peter explained. “Managed t-t-to talk him into lettin’ her go, but she’s gone be awhile g-g-gettin’ b-better.”

It was peaceful in the stables, and if he’d had the time to spare, Will could have spent the whole afternoon letting Peter lead him through the rows of crates and cages he kept, acquainting him with each animal. There was still plenty to be done today, however, and Will left for the fields of sugarcane.

The switch over hadn’t gone smoothly immediately following the war. The old driver slaves were less than popular with the field slaves, a lot of resentment and old wounds continuously bubbling up. Father’s answer had just been more punishment, more violence, but now, under Will’s management, things had become far more tolerable. Dividing up old work groups, shuffling of positions, putting the drivers in the fields and transferring power to the hardest of the workers, who now reported any issues directly to Will.

Working for their own land, some of the field labourers drove themselves harder than they’d ever done before, which had necessitated new rules to ensure their health and well-being. Break times and shorter hours in the field--of course Will had needed to hire new help to make up for the loss in labour, but the former slaves of neighbouring plantations were only too happy to join his employ--many of them the spouses, children, or family of the slaves who’d lived on the Graham plantation.

Will walked through the fields, talking to the workers, ensuring that everyone was following the rules as he laid them out. At first there had been some hesitance, fear of reprisal from the old overseers and drivers, but they had come to trust Will, and now readily informed him of any issues. Today it was thankfully nothing more than some petty disagreements and ruffled feathers, easily resolved.

Back at the home, Will found Reba in her office with her secretary, making the week’s shopping list. Hannibal had left it in her care, after she’d proven quite capable of keeping the pantry stocked to his specifications. Any items that Hannibal required for his...particular tastes, he could secure himself.

Reba greeted him in her no-nonsense, quickly and concisely going through the details of which items in the house needed his attention. She never mentioned any issue with the staff, though Will was not so naive to think there weren’t any. Reba merely took care of them so efficiently he need never intervene.

Madame Red dropped by in the afternoon. Her visit was unannounced, which was hardly surprising. What was surprising was how thoroughly exhausted she looked. Her normally impeccable hair was coming down in wisps around her face, and she hadn't bothered to change from her work clothing into her finery.

"Busy day at the morgue?" Will asked.

"*Someone* made quite mess of things at the docks this weekend," she said, sipping from her teacup. "It looks as though The Black Hand has been entirely wiped out, and the missing shipment of opium returned. But I suppose you know nothing of that."

Will looked at her with wide eyes. "I would like very much to thank the responsible party, for saving me the trouble," he said.

Madame Red rolled her eyes. "There's been another body." There was hesitance in her posture, as she set the cup back in the saucer and placed it very precisely on the tabletop. "Jack was sniffing around this morning."

Will leaned back in his seat, crossing an ankle over his knee. "Another of the suicides?"

"If these are suicides, they are both unnecessarily elaborate and excessive." Madame Red sniffed in disdain. "Generally speaking, they either slit their wrists *or* hang themselves. Rarely both."

They lapsed into momentary silence as Will considered what he knew of the case. This would be the fifth victim dispatched in such a method, all male, as far as he knew... "Another man?"

"Andrew Court, thirty-seven, solicitor."

Ranging in age from late teens to mid-fifties, from various economic backgrounds. A student, a doctor, a vagabond, and a florist, and now a solicitor. As far as he knew, they had nothing in common. Two were married, one widowed. Though he was loathe to admit it, this did indeed sound like the sort of case where Jack could use his particular brand of expertise.

Along with his empathy came a birthright entirely different from his peerage. The men in his family worked in tandem with Jack and his men. There was no official name for the organisation. There *was* no organisation, officially.

Jack was in charge of the southern states, from Louisiana to Georgia, Florida and the Carolinas, and reported directly to the White House. He stepped in when local authorities couldn't handle a case on their own, and when *he* couldn't handle the case on his own, that's when he came to Will.

James had fought Jack on it every step of the way. Will's grandfather had apparently absolutely refused his handler, before being threatened with the loss of his plantation. Since his father's death, Jack had no apparent qualms about enlisting a fourteen year old. Will looked into his eyes and saw a man for whom the ends justified the means, no matter what. It was his civic duty, Jack liked to say. Anything to get these people off the streets.

Looking at the crime scene photographs, meeting Jack's suspects eye to eye, there were few things in Will's life that had been as difficult--even his time spent in captivity. That had been physical pain, primarily, and Will found that by retreating deep within, the pain became little more than a distant, dull echo. The mental onslaught was not so easy to avoid. It pursued him, invading the most intimate corners of his mind, making it impossible to ignore.

The dark impulses these criminals felt haunted Will's thoughts. The murders played out over and over behind his eyes when he tried to sleep. Still, when Jack came calling, Will acquiesced without protest. It seemed a fitting punishment, after all the anguish the Grahams had caused, that they should be charged with this task.

And anyway, Will was hardly an innocent himself.

Madame Red poured some amber liquid in her teacup, never quite taking her gaze from Will. "You are not beholden to Jack Crawford," she said. "You have a kind, compassionate heart. You are not suited to this work."

Will fought the urge to correct his Aunt Bedelia, to let her know how very wrong she was about the contents of his heart. She'd been wounded, though, by her husband's death. Will didn't have many memories of his Uncle Christopher, who had relocated to Chicago after his marriage, when Will was still quite young. From what he'd heard from others, it sounded as though he'd been a good man, deeply affected by his abilities.

“If I can help put a stop to these killings, then I must,” Will told her. “It has nothing to do with Jack and everything to do with me.”

Madame Red scoffed. “You sound like Christopher.”

“I’ll take that as a compliment.”

“You really shouldn’t,” she said, mild. “Your uncle was always so eager to help and never stopped to wonder if he should.”

“You mean like my father.”

“James understood what you do not yet,” Madame Red said. It was not sympathy or pity that he felt from her; Bedelia was incapable of such things. All the same, there was a maternalistic instinct to, if not protect Will, at least attempt to guide him to safe harbour. “Christopher gave so much of himself away in his pursuit of justice, he lost track of who he was.”

“Aunt Bedelia.” Will got up from his seat and came to sit beside her on the wicker loveseat. “I will be careful not to do the same.”

“You’re barely sixteen years old,” Madame Red said. “You don’t even know who you are yet, let alone how to preserve your sense of self.”

Will laid a hand over her wrist. “I promise you that I do.”

Carefully, Madame Red removed herself from his touch. “Save your concern for yourself, Will,” she said. “I have no need for it.”

~*~

Bedelia stayed for an early dinner. After which Will spent the rest of the evening going over the news clippings he'd saved, now spread out over the tabletop, while polishing off the bottle of wine Bedelia had requested with dinner.

The details were almost identical in each case. Men found in the cellars of their homes and apartment buildings, hanging by the neck. A bucket or a bowl nearby, on which they'd stood, kicked aside. There was never much of a drop, toes dangling scant inches above the ground.

Did they suffer? Or had they simply passed out from loss of blood and toppled from their perch after? In the papers there was no conclusive cause of death. He should have asked Bedelia while she was visiting, but he'd been distracted when she'd brought up his father and uncle. Now it would have to wait until the morning.

Will tossed aside the paper he was reading and leaned back in his chair, feeling out the tight muscles in his body as he stretched. He dragged a hand over his face absent-mindedly and hissed in pain when he found the bruise around his eye. There was nothing more to do with it tonight. He'd just have to check with Bedelia in the morning.

When Will finally retired to his room, he found that Hannibal had drawn a hot bath. Steam curling, looping strange shapes in the air, like some feathered beast. He blinked, and it was gone.

Will stepped into the scalding water and lowered himself gingerly. The water was murky white and scented of roses. Will closed his eyes and rested his head against the basin, breathing deeply. Already sweat was beading on his forehead, dampening his hair, and the heat made his limbs heavy with sleepiness.

Long fingers pushed through the hair at his temples, and Hannibal drew a sponge across Will's face, wiping away the sweat and grime of the day.

He sighed, as the sponge moved down his neck and over his collarbones, the rise of his shoulders, careful with every tender spot left from his abduction. "Another early day tomorrow," he said. His words were slurred from exhaustion and too much wine.

“Sir?” Hannibal paused in his ministrations.

Will pitched himself forward, bringing his knees to his chest and looping his arms around them, back bared for Hannibal’s attention. “There’s been another of those suicides. Either I make my way to the morgue, or Jack’s going to invite himself to the manor.”

Hannibal dipped the sponge in the water and squeezed it down his back, letting it sluice over his skin. “Why you allow that man to order you around--”

“Enough,” Will said, and felt the exposed skin below the nape of his neck pulse with power. Hannibal fell silent at once, though Will could sense how it rankled him. But, after all, he had no choice in the matter. “It is my decision, and I have made it.”

Hannibal’s finger traced the edge of his design, tattooed into Will’s flesh. The touch was like ice down his spine, flipping in his stomach. Electricity sparked between his sign and its twin--the seal of their contract--Hannibal’s on the palm of his hand calling out to Will’s at the top of his spine.

“You are such a peculiar creature,” Hannibal said at length.

Will turned his head to rest his chin upon his knees, watching Hannibal from the corner of his eye. He was dizzy from the heat of the water. The steam hung heavy in the air between them like fog, making Hannibal’s hair fall limp over his forehead. He looked remarkably human in that instance.

“Takes one to know one.”

Hannibal made a noise of amused agreement. He flattened the pad of his finger against Will’s skin and he stroked gently, almost absently. Will was caught by those eyes, crimson now that no one else was around to see, staring into him with something akin to fondness--or as close to it as a creature such as Hannibal could feel. Will was drawn in by it and repulsed at the same time.

At last Will tore his gaze away and cleared his throat. “I think that’s enough soaking. You can turn down the bed, Hannibal; I can dry myself.”

Once Hannibal had gone, Will allowed himself to relax again. Arms loose at his sides, legs extended, head resting against the porcelain. The heaviness between his legs was unwelcome. He pressed his thighs together and focussed on his breathing until the tingling ebbed away.

He rose from the water, dressed in his nightshirt, brushed his teeth. Leaning over the sink, the lacy hem of his nightshirt brushed the backs of his thighs. Will tugged at it as he walked into the bedroom, aware of Hannibal's gaze on him; he felt overexposed. He dashed quickly to the bed and climbed under the covers.

Winston, curled up on the rug by the window, perked up at the sight of his master in bed. Will beckoned him, whistling and patting a hand on the empty side of the sheets. Hannibal watched the exchange with narrowed eyes, until Winston had jumped on the bed, turned in a circle three times, and settled down with a soft woof.

“Will there be anything else, My Lord?” The question was for Will, but Hannibal's attention was still mostly on Winston.

Will laid back against the pillows with a satisfied smile, and let his eyes fall closed. “That will be all.” Will waved his hand dismissively. “Please go now.”

Hannibal moved around the room, putting out the lights and closing the windows. Once he had gone, Will could let out the breath he'd been holding, relaxing into his bed. Normally the day's events would have been enough to keep him up for some time, turning thoughts over and over in his mind. Between the hot bath and the wine, however, his muscles were lax and his eyelids heavy.

Winston nudged closer, snout under Will's hand. His fur was long and so very soft, it was soothing for Will to stroke his fingers through it. When he'd been quite young, his mother had done the same thing to him before bed each night. In that twilight space between sleeping and wakefulness, he could almost imagine he was in another time and place altogether, and all that had occurred in the past two years was nothing more than a bad dream...

Chapter End Notes

Once again I have to thank my dearest [TheSeaVoices](#) for inspiring me to write this and making all the glorious artwork for it. Go shower them with praise [on tumblr!](#)

And thank you all for your feedback and patience between chapters. There is more still to come, and we can't wait to share it with you!

Chapter 3

The coroner's office was near the French Quarter, on the banks of the Mississippi. It was coolest in the stone and cement basement, but damp from the moisture that seeped through the walls, forever smelling of briney, stagnant water. In the anatomical theatre and morgue, it was overpowered by the astringent sting of chemicals mingling sickly with the scent of death and rot.

Madame Red never seemed to notice or mind, a consummate professional. Always calm and detached no matter how gruesome the body or severe the decay. Will had seen seasoned officers run from the room to empty their stomachs, while Bedelia continued with her examination, unperturbed.

Will admired her determination in the face of adversity from those who claimed the coroner's office was no place for a woman--if she insisted on practicing medicine, there were more appropriate ways for her to practice. As a midwife, perhaps? Will could appreciate it, to a certain extent. Few men he knew had any qualms about letting him know just what they thought of a child taking over the family business.

Andrew Court was laid out on Madame Red's slab this morning. Livid purple bruising under the neck stood out in stark contrast against his grey skin. He was in good shape. Will would have thought he was at least a decade younger if he hadn't known his age. A man who took care of his body, free of wrinkles and greying hair. The only other blemishes were the vertical slits stretching from wrist almost to the elbow, cut deep, now held together by Bedelia's delicate stitching.

Will made a circle around the body, taking in all the finer details. Cheek closely shaved, likely within a few hours of his death. Ink stains on his index finger and thumb of his left hand. The spot where he'd once worn a wedding band--widowed long enough to have removed the ring, but for a brief enough time to have not yet remarried. Trim all over, with well defined muscles in his legs and hips. Tanned on his hands, face, and neck, several shades darker than the rest of his skin.

There were echoes that lingered even after his death, of the man's emotions. Faint, but if Will he closed his eyes, and concentrated, he could tease them out of the teeming tangle surrounding him, and bringing them to the forefront. A profound, aching sadness, loneliness, a gentle and considerate man, more intelligent than ambitious.

Will saw all the details coming together to paint a picture of the man Andrew Court was. Still mourning the death of his wife, incapable of moving on despite what society had to say on the matter. (Bedelia mentioned the wedding band found in his breast pocket). He'd thrown himself into his work, spent his free time cycling. Even in his grief, he'd maintained his appearance as was expected of a man of his station.

Though he'd only personally seen one of the other bodies, he knew from having read the autopsies that the bruising and slit wrists were where the similarities between these men began and ended. Well, that, and the fact that none of these were suicides.

"The killer is choosing these victims entirely at random," Will murmured, almost to himself.

When he opened his eyes, Jack Crawford was standing just inside the door. Dressed in brown pinstripe trousers and vest, and a paisley tie, jacket discarded. He looked intimidating with the sleeves of his crisp button-down rolled back to expose his well-muscled forearms crossed over his chest. Leaning against the threshold, his keen gaze was locked on Will like a hunting dog on the scent of its prey.

“Jack.”

Jack pushed off the wall with one foot. “Will.” He nodded in greeting. “What a pleasant surprise. Just the man I was looking for.”

Will rolled his eyes. “Let’s not pretend I’m here for any other purpose.”

“Alright,” Jack said. He shoved his hands in his pockets and smiled at Will, the very picture of magnanimity. “So. The killer is choosing these victims entirely at random.”

“It isn’t that the killer is intentionally choosing men with nothing in common in order to divert attention from himself; there can be no victim profile because none exists,” Will explained.

Jack rubbed his jaw in consideration. Will could feel the displeasure and annoyance rippling from him. “And how, exactly, are we supposed to catch someone who has no pattern and kills at random?”

“I could glean more from the crime scene itself,” Will said, and Jack knew as much. He had to wonder if Madame Red had been running interference between the two of them to this point. It was well-meaning on her part, but unnecessary. “It would give me more insight into the killer’s state of mind.”

“You’re suggesting I wait for *another* body before continuing with the investigation?” Jack’s booming voice echoed in the close, low-ceilinged space.

Will had seen plenty of men cower before Jack in a rage, but Will had experienced far worse. “You can continue to waste the manpower--I don’t care to tell you how to do your job, Jack. But if you want the benefit of my expertise, I need to see the intact crime scene--as untouched as possible.”

Jack exhaled through his nose, lips twisted. “Fine. I’ll have someone come around to pick you up as soon as there’s another body.” He tugged the gold pocket watch from his vest and flipped it open. “There’s actually another case which could use your particular brand of...expertise, if you have the time.”

“Do I have a choice in the matter?” Will asked, arching a wry brow.

Jack gave him a delighted grin. “The *illusion* of choice is a powerful thing, My Lord.”

~*~

Jack kept his office on Rue Bassin, right next door to Storyville. It was a tawdry little place, to be sure, with all the drinking, gambling, and prostitution. One benefit of the location was that no one ever looked twice at any of the, sometimes quite odd, comings and goings of Jack's associates.

Madame Red had insisted on joining them. Jack was pleased as punch to have Will under his thumb, and he didn't deny her. In his office there was a map of the city that took up most of one wall. Will was used to seeing it marked up with locations important to whatever case he was working on, and there were indeed black pins marking where each of the suicide bodies had been found.

In addition to those, however, were red pins dotting the streets of the Garden District and Lafayette. Will stepped closer, studying the locations. He did his best to keep track of what happened in his city, but he hadn't heard of any deaths in that area. It was a very wealthy neighbourhood--it was possible someone was paying to cover it up.

Jack sat behind his desk, studying Will as he studied the map. Will could feel that sharp gaze heavy on his back. There was something pridefully proprietary about it that made his skin crawl. "Anything interesting?" he asked.

Will heaved a sigh and came to sit next to Madame Red in the chair before Jack's desk. "I'm not a crystal ball, Jack. I don't pull visions out of thin air."

That lit a spark of displeasure in Jack's eye. "Four girls--ages sixteen to nineteen--have gone missing in the last month, all prostitutes; the map shows their last known locations."

Madame Red made a small humming noise of sudden apprehension. "The Ajisai parties. Hobbs, Thompson, Ellicut."

"I haven't heard of them," Will protested.

"No, I don't imagine you have." A queer smile played at Bedelia's lips. "The guest list is quite exclusive. Only the wealthiest and most discreet are invited to join in the...play."

Will's interest was piqued. Could these Ajisai parties have anything at all to do with the men and women who had killed his parents and kept him prisoner?

Jack nodded. "That's what we're thinking. But it's been impossible for us to get an agent inside. For the last two we've had lookouts, but they didn't see anything--didn't even remember having seen the girl in the first place."

"What you need," Madame Red said, as though she wished she didn't have to speak the words, "is bait."

Will cast a cool glance in her direction. "Forgive me for saying so, Auntie, but I don't think you quite fit the profile."

Madame Red gave him an assessing head-to-toe. "Nor do you. But Hannibal can work wonders." She reached out to take Will's chin between her fingers and tilted his head to the side. "A little rouge and the right gown, you could be quite convincing."

“You can’t be serious,” Will sneered.

But Jack was stroking his chin thoughtfully. “Could you get him inside?”

“Jack,” Madame Red chided, “who do you think you’re asking?”

Though Will rankled at the way they openly discussed his participation in front of him, as though he had no choice in the matter, he couldn’t bring himself to protest too violently. After all, it might be the perfect opportunity to conduct his own investigation. He would suffer the indignity of a corset and gown if it meant sending another of his captors to meet their fate.

It was important to keep that in mind as his aunt mirthfully informed his butler of the plan over tea. Will gritted his teeth, teacup clutched tightly in his grip, as they discussed styles of gowns. Matthew, narrowly avoiding knocking over the tea stand thanks to Hannibal’s quick reflex and steadying hand, leered at Will over his shoulder and remarked how lovely he’d look in blue.

~*~

Will arched his back, the long line of his spine undulating with the movement. His skin, milk white and unblemished save for Hannibal’s mark, glistened with a faint sheen of sweat from the effort. He hung his head, curls curtaining his face, and gasped out, “That’s enough, Hannibal.”

Hannibal tutted. “Just a bit further, My Lord.” He grunted with the effort. “It’s rather tight, but I think you can bear it.”

A whimper escaped Will’s lips and went straight to Hannibal’s groin. He gave a sharp tug and Will’s hands tightened around the headboard. “Oh!” he cried, straining away from Hannibal’s hold on him. “Please, I don’t think I can take any more.”

“Now, now.” Hannibal bared his fangs and jerked hard. “A young lady your age strives to have a waist that matches her age in inches. You can be thankful I haven’t attempted to do the same with you.”

Will tossed a fierce glare over his shoulder, teeth bared in a snarl. “You’re enjoying yourself far too much, I think.”

That was truer than the young lord realised, Hannibal thought, admiring the way the soft silk of the corset looked against Will’s skin. His smirk only further enraged the boy. Hannibal finished off the lacing with a neat little bow and let his gloved fingers brush the dimpled skin just beneath. Will shuddered and pulled away.

“How am I supposed to move in this thing, let alone dance?” he wheezed.

Will went to stand in front of the mirror and tugged at the bottom of the corset. It was cream coloured with lavender laces and rosettes, and a delicate scrolling pattern picked out in pink stitching. The colours were flattering and the stiff boning gave a feminine line to his already trim figure. With the embellishments at the bustline of his gown and the delicate curve of his waist, it would distract from the flatness of his chest.

A faint blush spread over Will's cheeks and down his neck, as he took in his reflection--matching cream stockings fastened to the garters of the corset, ruffled cream bloomers and lacy chemise falling just above his knees. He fingered the grey pearls down the front, a distant expression on his face.

The illusion wouldn't be difficult to achieve, his face youthfully round and features soft. There was little doubt Will would draw just the sort of attention he desired this evening. Hannibal ignored the stirrings of arousal at the sight he presented.

There were no rules, other than those laid down when the deal was struck, regarding their interactions, but Hannibal himself had always kept his dealings strictly professional. Now was not the time to be distracted by the wiles of his young master. And definitely not in Madame Red's guest room, of all places.

"How many more layers can there *be*?" Will snapped, when Hannibal presented him with the camisole to match his chemise, more lavender ribbon lacing through the neckline and around the waistline.

"Gentlemen often take for granted how much effort goes into looking effortlessly lovely," Hannibal remarked, as he pulled the camisole into place. Next came the petticoat, with all its ruffled layers.

Will had to take a seat at the vanity, breathing quick and shallow. Hannibal knelt at his feet to slide on the dainty satin slippers, the same Persian blue as his gown. "I don't understand the point of all the fancy decorations," Will complained, tapping the heels together, making the beaded applique clink. He picked at the lacing on his camisole. "No one's even going to see it."

Hannibal paused, hands lightly wrapped around Will's dainty ankle. "Each piece serves a function," he said, "and there is no need to sacrifice style for practicality. Besides, I wouldn't say *no one* will see it." He stroked his finger along the curve of Will's calf, separated by stocking and glove.

"No one important, anyway," Will said, and extricated himself from Hannibal's hold.

Hannibal caught his chin and Will went quite still, eyes flicking to Hannibal's. All his breath left him in one shuddery exhale and he didn't draw another for what seemed like an eternity.

"Hannibal..."

"Quiet," Hannibal admonished.

Will jerked his head free, eyes flashing in warning. "I give the orders," he snapped. "Not you."

Hannibal bowed his head in acquiescence, though he did not lower his eyes. It was less a refusal to submit, and more a subtle reminder that though Will held him now, the same would not always be true. Will's frame loosened after a tense moment, and when Hannibal took hold of his face again, Will held still and silent.

"Under normal circumstances, your natural colour would be quite sufficient. However, given that the young ladies who have been taken are of the oldest profession..." Hannibal dipped a brush in the tin of rouge and swept it along Will's cheekbones and temples. "The occasion calls for a bolder look."

After the rouge came the powder, and then the bold carmine and wax applied to his mouth by brush, sinful on Will's cupid's bow lips. His hair was far shorter than was fashionable, but by carefully shaping the curls, Hannibal was able to give it the appearance of volume, and he tucked a cluster of pale blue and gold hydrangea to one side.

Will was oddly, obediently silent through it all, and as he donned his gown, the slick blue silk falling into place and completing the look. When Hannibal was finished with his ministrations, Will snatched the folded fan from the vanity, flicked it open, and began fanning himself.

"This is absurd. How they can make it through a single dance without passing out is beyond me."

"Perhaps you should practice," Hannibal said, and extended his hand.

For a moment Will only stared at Hannibal's outstretched hand in blatant derision and disbelief. Then, haltingly, he put his hand in Hannibal's. "You've only ever taught me to lead. I don't think a few practice rounds will undo the years of lessons I've had."

Hannibal drew him closer. Never had he been so keenly aware of the difference in their height and build than in that moment, Will small and slight next to Hannibal's bulk. His frame locked tight and they both stepped forward in the same moment, crashing together.

From under his fringe, Will scowled up at him. Hannibal smiled back serenely. He splayed his hand wide on Will's waist and guided him backward, counting off the rhythm. They did not move together smoothly. Will was entirely too tense and resistant, but there was a certain graceless charm to his movements, lip caught between his teeth in concentration.

"I doubt they will be scrutinising your dancing abilities that closely," Hannibal assured him, when Will had stepped on his toes for the third time in as many minutes.

Will flushed bright red at the implication. His arms dropped to his side. "Then there's hardly any point in practicing, is there?" He regarded Hannibal with eyes narrowed suspiciously.

A knock interrupted them, Madame Red's voice calling through the door, wondering if they required any assistance. Will stepped away from Hannibal, ducking his head, and Hannibal went to the door to let her in.

"Why Hannibal," Madame Red murmured, at the sight of her nephew, "it's better than even I had imagined."

Hannibal met her twinkling eyes with his own, and dipped his head. "I'm pleased to meet with your approval, Madame."

Madame Red circled him, taking in every detail and stopped at last face to face with him. As dainty as she was, "Won't you be the belle of the ball?"

"Please," Will scoffed. "We should be going. If I'm going to be Jack's bait, it's best I get there early, lest another girl be taken in my stead."

"Matthew is bringing around the carriage now," Madame Red said, on her way out of the room.

Will followed, but paused on the threshold, hand on the doorframe as he caught his breath. It did things to Hannibal, to see the boy in such a state. "You'll be on hand, of course, should I need you?"

"Of course, My Lord. Now, allow me to see to Matthew, so he doesn't end up running the carriage into the garden again." Will spared him a look of pained sympathy as they parted.

Once they'd gone and the door was closed behind them, Hannibal took a moment to prepare himself for the evening. With a flare of red from his eyes, he was properly attired to squire Madame Red--ruby and silver brocade vest, black silk ascot, tailcoat and slacks. His leather boots shone like new.

Through the lacy curtains he could see Will standing on the front lawn, hands clasped behind his back in an effort not to fidget. He practically vibrated with tension. As calm as he was when confronting his captors, those were a known quantity. That same surety didn't carry over into his cases for Jack. In those, he never knew what he would encounter.

Hannibal let the curtain slip back into place and checked his reflection in the mirror, plumping his ascot. Unlike Will, he was looking forward to the evening's festivities. In Will's search for revenge, there was plenty of good fun to be had, making those men and women pay in blood.

But those times were few and far between, and as lovely as Will was slaking his righteous thirst for blood, there was something far lovelier still when he was forced to confront those who hadn't personally wronged him. His delicate, thrumming uncertainty if this was the right thing to do, *every time*, before he inevitably set Hannibal loose on his prey.

Oh yes...Tonight would be a pleasant diversion.

~*~

"Matthew is closer to you in age," Madame Red had said, and, "The two of you make such a dashing couple," after Hannibal had dressed Matthew up in his formalwear.

Will glared at them the entire carriage ride; he felt every pothole jarring through him, the boning of the corset cutting into the soft skin under his arms and digging in the hollow of his ribcage. "If he steps on my feet, I won't be responsible for my actions," he hissed at Hannibal, on their way into the mansion of one Garrett Jacob Hobbs.

The whole of the garden district was lit up, but none so bright as the Hobbs mansion. Fragrant honeysuckle climbed the gates and magnolia trees overhung the sidewalk, where carriages and automobiles queued up with their prestigious guests. Will watched a judge, two city councillors, and a handful of doctors and lawyers, along with the chief of police. A veritable who's who of New Orleans wealthy elite.

As Matthew handed him down from the carriage, managing not to trip him or splash gutter water on his gown, Will snapped open his fan, keeping it like a shield in front of his face. It was unlikely that any of these people would recognise him--he was aware of them, but they paid little attention to the child heir of the Graham estate, not to mention his disguise. All the same, he didn't care to have his cover blown after going to such lengths.

Once they were indoors, the fan was no longer simply for looks. It was absolutely sweltering, so many bodies moving around, dancing and mingling. Will found it difficult to focus on anything else beyond Matthew's anxious excitement, bubbling up from beside him. He tried to push it aside; Matthew was enjoying his role in this whole farce far too much for Will's liking. Will always found Matthew's strange fascination with him unsettling, but it was worse somehow, dressed like this, playing lovers.

Trying not to shudder, Will disengaged himself from Matthew, lips stretched tightly. "Get me a drink, Matthew." The man tripped over his own feet in his zeal to follow the order, knocking into two women and a vase of flowers. Will took advantage of the resulting chaos to lose himself in the throng.

The party spread throughout the mansion, spilling from beyond the ballroom and parlour into the garden where lovers took advantage of the growing dark to steal away in shadowed alcoves. Will walked amongst the crowd, taking it all in.

The girls who'd been hired for the event were easily distinguished--while there were many wealthy ladies present, they were all at least a decade older. The prostitutes were all in the height and glory of youth with blushing cheeks and ample, unblemished bosom. Will was all too aware that there was only so much Hannibal could do with his own lack of breast. If the idea were to draw the attention of whoever it was that was taking these girls, he was at a clear disadvantage.

But there was something more about these girls, none of which could be much older than eighteen. All of them pretty, but none of them particularly stunning--they were darker skinned than was in style, with freckles dotting their faces. All of them with hair in shades of red from strawberry blond to dark auburn, some stained with Turkish henna. Whoever had invited them had a clear preference.

At the edge of the garden, where the sounds of the party drifted to silence, Will found another young girl, maybe his own age, though she was quite different from the others. Her dress was an almost dowdy pink calico with lace dripping from the sleeves and bunched at her throat, it looked more suited to an afternoon promenade than a ball. Her overall appearance was at odds with the sapphire and diamond pendant around her neck.

She was seated on a stone bench under the curtaining branches of a pussy willow tree, as if hoping to go unnoticed, and in fact at Will's approach she startled, drawing in on herself. Will pushed aside the branches and ducked under them, offering her a smile. "Hello."

Blue eyes much like his own studied Will suspiciously, taking him in from head to toe. "You don't look like you're supposed to be here," she said.

Will looked pointedly at her gown and said, "Neither do you." She tilted her head in sullen acquiescence. Keeping in mind the role he was playing, Will dropped a slightly clumsy curtsy. "Elizabeth," he said.

The girl pursed her lips and said, tone bored, "Abigail Hobbs."

"You'll forgive my presumption, but you don't seem to be enjoying your own party." Will was careful to speak in a soft tone; though his voice remained unchanged, it was still in a lower register than one might expect from a girl.

“This isn’t my party,” she said. “It’s for my father.” Abigail did not hold herself like the daughter of a wealthy businessman. Her shoulders were rolled forward in poor posture, arms crossed defensively over her flat chest. Even if it hadn’t been for the anxiety thick in the air around her, Will could have read it in how she held herself and the lines of her face.

Looking at her more closely, Will couldn’t help but see the similarities between her and the hired girls. Freckle-flecked face almost reminiscent of blood spatter, sun-brown skin, rich auburn hair hanging lank around her shoulders.

“You don’t look like the others,” Abigail said, almost too quietly to be heard, and Will felt a tremulous hope rise up briefly in her before flickering out again.

Will swallowed his automatic response, that Abigail *did* look like those girls, and reminded himself of the role he was meant to be playing. He shrugged and flung himself down beside her inelegantly. “Ada was supposed to come tonight, but she fell ill and asked me to come in her place. Couldn’t say no to a paying job, could I?”

Any lingering suspicion in Abigail left at his words, but there was a sad resignation that took its place. Abigail slid closer to him on the bench. “How old are you?” she asked.

“Sixteen,” Will answered, and dropped his lashes at Abigail’s piercing look.

“Do they make you say that?” she asked.

“You speak very plainly for a lady of your station,” Will demurred.

It was Abigail’s turn to shrug, an artlessly elegant gesture. “My dad fills our house with whores. I don’t see the point in equivocating.” At Will’s look, she added, belatedly, “Sorry, is that offensive?”

“I think it’s refreshing.” Will spoke honestly. In his life, surrounded mostly by his servants, he was unused to honesty. Even with those who were on more equal standing, like Hannibal, Madame Red, or Jack were constantly obfuscating the true meaning of what they said behind layer and layer of nuanced insinuation.

Abigail smiled hesitantly, and Will returned the expression with one of his own. “Most of the girls won’t talk to me. I can’t figure out if it’s because they think they’re better than me, or they know they’re not.” Casting a look around them, she leaned in and spoke in little more than a whisper, “Or if they know what my father would do, if he caught them near me.”

Will drew back. “Are you trying to warn me off?” he asked with a nervous titter.

“I wonder at what point the money isn’t worth it any more,” came Abigail’s mysterious answer. She rose to her feet. “You should probably go; you don’t have the right look about you, anyway.” And with that, she was gone, ducking beneath the branches and disappearing into the dark gardens.

Very curious. Will made his way back to the party, mulling over what he’d gathered from Abigail. The conflicting feelings of love, fear, and obligation towards her father. Even with her gone, Will felt smothered by it, barely able to catch a lungful of breath, and it had nothing to do

with the corset. That was how Abigail lived, on the edge of terror, always waiting for the moment the air was cut off altogether.

If Crawford had photographs of the four girls that had gone missing, Will knew what he'd see in them. He imagined they looked quite a lot like Abigail Hobbs. He understood now that he wasn't the bait Jack needed, but that didn't mean he couldn't be useful in other ways. That gave him an idea.

It wasn't so difficult to find Madame Red, holding court with a group of young gentlemen hanging on her every word and seeing to her every need. Matthew was lurking behind her, looking like nothing so much as a kicked puppy, and his eyes brightened when he saw Will.

Will ducked sideways through the crowded parlour door and into the drawing room, thick with cigar smoke, then into the ballroom. He spied Hannibal sipping champagne with a councilman and his wife, but before he could make his way across the thronging crowd, a hand closed around his upper arm.

"How is it that a lovely flower such as yourself has yet to be plucked this evening?" the man asked. He was vaguely familiar to Will, from one of his visits to the courthouse in Jefferson Parish. Bailiff Sykes, he believed.

Will glanced at the place where the man held onto him, skin turning white around his fingertips from the tightness of his grip. There was an oily slick desperation in Sykes that Will had never sensed from him before, assuming him unnecessary of concern. Now Will made a mental note to keep an eye on him in the future.

If he wasn't already certain that it was Hobbs he was after, Will might have considered Sykes for this. As it was, he didn't like the idea of spurning Sykes, knowing the next girl to attract his attention would suffer for Will's behaviour. He considered carefully how to phrase his rejection so as to soften the blow.

Turning just slightly away, so Sykes couldn't see his mouth, he caught Hannibal's eye and said, "Dance with me," in barely a whisper. There was enough of an order in it for Hannibal to obey immediately, placing his glass on the tray of a passing servant, and cutting through the crowd toward him.

"Oh, but I have been," Will said, turning back to Sykes. He toyed coquettishly with the neckline of his gown. "Though had I known my options, perhaps I would have held out a bit longer before making my choice."

Sykes' fingers twitched, digging in even harder. Beneath, Will could feel the skin bruising from the force of it and gritted his teeth to keep from crying out and pulling away. Sykes jerked him closer, so their bodies were pressed together. "There are no hard and fast rules here, my dear," he said. "Nothing to keep you from changing your mind."

"My lady?" Hannibal asked. So smoothly as to appear effortless, Hannibal eased Will's arm from Sykes and placed himself at a subtle angle between them.

"Lady?" Sykes echoed scornfully. "Must be quite the lay."

Hannibal's eyes narrowed dangerous, but Will tugged gently on his hand. Outwardly, it would look plaintive rather than insistent, but Hannibal allowed himself to be led away. He turned from Sykes and led Will to the dance floor. His tone was humorous, though laced still with lingering disdain for Sykes. "I thought you would prefer to avoid dancing with me," he said.

"If it comes down between you and Sykes, I suppose you'll do," Will murmured. He allowed Hannibal to spin him out and back again. They traced circles across the floor, close enough to the other couples for Will to feel the air passing between them, the brushing of gowns against his own, the stench of sweat under the cover of expensive perfume.

"There's something I need from you," Will said. Hannibal arched a brow in questioning. "I suppose you've noticed the ladies for hire."

"Blue-eyed, titian-haired and sunkissed?" Hannibal remarked. He met Will's gaze, eyes alight with humour. "One out of three isn't so bad."

Will rolled his eyes. "I already know it's Hobbs that's taking them, and I have a good idea of why."

"Oh?" Hannibal twirled him around and pulled him closer than was decorous. Then again, the party-goers hardly seemed preoccupied with decorum. He'd had an inkling of just what these Ajisai parties entailed, and it was confirmed by the embraces he'd spied on the gardens, and the scarce distance between the bodies surrounding them on the dance floor.

"I met Abigail Hobbs in the gardens," Will said.

Hannibal hummed. "Let me guess: blue-eyed, titian-haired, and sunkissed? Case closed, then. You can take that information back to Crawford and allow him to deal with him."

"And if Hobbs takes another girl tonight?" Will asked.

"Of course, that's your only concern," Hannibal said, with cool assurance.

Will gave him a withering look. They both knew that wasn't Will's only concern, and Hannibal was only pushing him for the pleasure of having Will say so. Of having Will admit that he'd prefer to deal with Hobbs himself. Will hated giving him that satisfaction, but there was little point in denying it. "Bringing Jack in would only complicate things unnecessarily," he said.

"As you say, my lady." Hannibal dipped his head in nothing more than feigned deference, and Will bristled in his arms. "And did you seek me out for my assistance in this matter?"

That had been Will's intention, and they both knew *that* as well. Hannibal could use his powers to cast a glamour over him, to make his hair appear the right shade and darken his skin. Now, however, Will felt disinclined to ask for Hannibal's help.

"No," he said, disentangling himself from Hannibal's arms and putting some distance between them. His conversation with Abigail gave him the impression she knew what had become of the missing girls. If only he could find her and press her gently for more information, he wouldn't need the glamour.

“My lady,” Hannibal murmured, “I know you wouldn’t jeopardise your mission out of childish stubbornness.”

Will whirled on him, gown swishing around his feet, angry enough to spit. “I will handle this myself, without any assistance from you, am I understood?”

Hannibal bowed, eyes never leaving Will’s as he did, a spark of challenge in them. He said nothing, and Will huffed in annoyance. “Then you’re dismissed for the evening, Hannibal. Why don’t you go find Bedelia? I’m certain the two of you can find some way to entertain one another.”

With that, Will gathered his skirts and turned to make his way through the crowd. Walking through the downstairs and gardens had given him some idea as to the layout of the house. It wasn’t so different from Madame Red’s, architecturally. There was likely a servant’s staircase in the hall just outside the kitchen, which Abigail had used to escape the party.

The grand staircase was in the heart of the party, with too many people for Will to follow her without drawing attention, but perhaps the servants would be busy enough in the back of the house that his presence might go unnoticed.

As soon as he crossed over the threshold from ballroom to gardens, a man stepped from the shadows, blocking his path, hand on Will’s bare shoulder. Will had a new and profound appreciation for the manhandling women withstood on a regular basis.

Handsome, with a sardonic twist to his lips, neatly trimmed moustache and closely shorn hair, the man stood out among the other gentlemen at the party. He was dressed in a white jacket and trousers, his blue shirt a match for Will’s, and both their eyes.

From the features and complexion, and the reddish hue to his golden hair, Will presumed this was Garrett Jacob Hobbs.

Will relaxed under Hobbs’ touch and smiled what he hoped was a playful smile, teeth biting into his bottom lip. “Mister Hobbs,” he said, dropping into a curtsy.

Hobbs’ shifted his hold on Will, fingers light down his gloved forearm to take his hand, and lifted it against his lips. His mouth just barely brushed against Will’s knuckles when he spoke. “You have me at a disadvantage, my dear lady,” he said. “I thought I knew every girl here tonight. I have never been so pleased to learn I am mistaken.”

Remembering Abigail’s smothering fear, Will didn’t have to fake his breathlessness; it overtook him now. “I’ve heard the others talking about the parties. It sounded so glamorous and exciting,” Will said. “But I’m afraid to say it’s not all I imagined it would be.”

“Oh, how disappointing!” Hobbs’ eyes were twinkling and he retained hold of Will’s hand, now clasped against his chest. “Perhaps we could find something more diverting, just the two of us.”

The suggestion coiled sick in the pit of Will’s stomach. Too much of Abigail’s thoughts and feelings still hung heavy over him and he struggled not to react as she would, and indeed likely had, towards her father’s advances. Smile stuck firmly in place, he peered up at Hobbs from under his lashes and asked, “What did you have in mind?”

Hobbs led Will towards the back of the house, but instead of going up the stairs, he took them down into the cellar. A shiver ran up Will's spine when the heavy wooden door closed behind them, cutting off the sounds of the party altogether. Descending the stone steps, he was helpless but to recall his time in captivity.

Thankfully, Hobbs' cellar was nothing like the one he'd been held in. The air was warm and though the walls were stone, they were decorated in the spoils of Hobbs' hunting--antlers and mounted deer heads. Will's slippers glided across the dark marble flooring, almost slippery underfoot.

They came fully into the room and Will stopped short at the sight. In the centre of the room was a four poster bed. Chains hung suspended from the ceiling, manacles resting near the pillows at the head and two more at the foot of the bed.

It's what you're here for, remember? Will affected a casual, almost bored moue and accepted the flute of champagne Hobbs offered him. "I'd heard you were fond of hunting, but I had no idea how impressive the trophies."

Hobbs' eyes narrowed slightly. "I had no idea my sport was the topic of conversation around the whore house." There was a disdainful, almost violent timbre in his voice and he stepped into Will's space. "You still haven't told me your name."

Will sipped at his champagne, inexplicably light-headed. He'd faced down more frightening men and women than Garrett Jacob Hobbs, and yet he felt almost frozen with fear. "Elizabeth," he whispered. He couldn't seem to force enough air from his lungs for any more volume than that. "And of course you are. We all dream of being invited to the Ajisai parties."

There was such a dizzying milieu of emotion going on inside the man's head, it was difficult for Will to focus on any one thing. Desire, first and foremost--not entirely sexual, but impossible to separate from it, either. A desire to consume, to own, entirely. It was suffocating, and Will suddenly understood this was the weight Abigail suffered under, drawing breath after desperate half-breath.

Beyond that was entitlement. A simmering, suppressed rage. Guilt that rose up and was crushed down ruthlessly by the unshakeable belief Hobbs held that what he did was good, and true, and pure. Will knew that these girls weren't merely missing.

Hobb's hummed, dismissive. Will wasn't even certain he'd heard what he'd said. He lifted a hand to brush Will's curls against his knuckles. "You wouldn't be my first choice, but you are quite lovely. There's an air of innocence about you that's quite appealing, and unusual for a lady of your profession. I'm going to enjoy you."

Will laughed nervously. "I aim to please, Sir," he said.

Hobbs sighed, continuing on as if Will hadn't spoken. "Of course, it's unavoidable, working with spoiled goods." The backs of his fingers trailed down Will's cheeks and ghosted along his lips.

Revulsion--Will wasn't sure which of them it came from, perhaps both--and a throb of hot lust shot between them. Will's stomach surged up in his throat, threatening to make him sick. He

turned away from Hobbs, knocking aside his hand, but before could make it more than a couple of steps, he swooned.

Hobbs caught him neatly around the waist. He leaned in, nosing along Will's jaw. Will brought up a hand between them, meant to press against Hobbs' chest, but he was so *weak*. Damn this corset.

"No one looks for missing whores," Hobbs hissed, lips to Will's pulse. "It's easier if you don't fight it."

Will opened his mouth, ready to call out Hannibal's name, but he couldn't make his tongue work to form the word. A faint, reedy sound escaped him, and Hobbs laughed, and just as the room went dark around him, Hannibal's name passed his lips.

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Will woke with a throbbing head, for a moment too disoriented to feel or hear anything beyond the beating of his heart, echoing loudly in his ears. The rest came to him slowly. His mouth was cotton-dry. He'd been gagged. Blinking his eyes open, he took in his surroundings.

Still in the cellar, though the lights had been dimmed, the room plunged into shadow. Will was laid out on the bed, wrists and ankles manacled. The chains had been pulled taut so that he was held in an awkward position, legs and arms lifted just slightly towards the ceiling. It gave him no leverage to move or resist--when he shifted, his shoulder joints screamed in protest--and held Will's wrists downward, so he couldn't turn his hands to grip the chain.

The fancy dress was gone, leaving him with only corset and bloomers. Certainly there was no question left in Hobbs' mind as to his sex. Lying there, Will could feel the echoes of all the girls who had gone before them. Their pleasure, first, at Hobbs' careful hands, but it was never quite right, never what he *really* wanted, and then came his rage, the rough handling, his hands wrapped around their necks when he found his release, squeezing the life out of them for not being the right girl.

Then lifting them lifeless to pierce on the racks of antlers, blood draining down their bodies, obscenely artistic, pooling on the marble slick and black. He'd gut them and skin them, take their organs from their body and the hair from their heads. Not a single part left unused, right down to the marrow in their bones.

Bile burned the back of Will's throat and he choked on it, coughing around the gag in his mouth.

"Ah, welcome back." There was Hobbs coming out of the dark depths of the room to sit beside Will. His grin, cast in the flickering light of the candles, was skeletal and terrifying. Will saw him, skin waxy and grey, like a corpse. Then he blinked the illusion was gone.

How long had he been unconscious? Certainly Hannibal should have noticed his absence by now, and given their proximity, he would be able to sense Will's distress. He would arrive any moment now to save the day...

"You're just *full* of surprises, aren't you?" Hobbs asked. "Are you even a whore at all?"

Will jutted his chin out proudly, unable to do more than mumble around his gag. "It's not that I doubt your charm, particularly given the taste of some of my colleagues, but, you see, I spied you earlier tonight, in the gardens."

Hobbs rose and disappeared into the shadows. There was a high-pitched cry of pain, and then he was back, dragging Abigail behind him. She came willingly, limp like a doll in his hold, let him fling her across the room to sprawl on the floor at the bedside.

Will's heart raced, and he glanced frantically around the room, looking for some sign of Hannibal. He wasn't afraid for himself--Hannibal wouldn't let him die, not without eating his soul, and even if he did, Will wasn't afraid of death.

But Abigail, fragile and resigned, staring fixedly at the floor now. He feared for her. Will had seen the potential in her, the enduring strength that had brought her this far in life without collapsing under the great weight upon her. He couldn't see that snuffed out.

"Do you want to tell me what it was you were discussing with my daughter?" Hobbs was paranoid and possessive, and nearly swallowed up with grief.

"We were just talking about the party, Father, I promise," Abigail said.

Hobbs knelt beside her, reaching out to tuck a strand of hair back behind her ear. "Do you take me for a fool?" he asked. "Conspiring with a boy *in my home*, under my nose, and you think I wouldn't find out about it?" He stood then, towering over them both, eyes wild on Will's. "Did you think you could steal her away from me?"

Will gasped for air when Hobbs jerked the gag from his mouth. He licked his dry lips and shook his head. "She wasn't planning anything, it was me." His mind raced, trying to come up with a believable story, landing on the necklace Abigail wore. "The girls tell me when they're going somewhere fancy." He wiggled his fingers for show. "I pick pockets down in Storyville. Comes in handy at these parties, all the ladies with their fine jewellery."

"That's a nice story," Hobbs snorted. He grabbed a fistful of Will's hair and jerked his head backward, "But I saw you arrive with Madame Red. You must be the young Lord Graham. I've heard a great deal about you."

Hobbs released him and turned his attention back to Abigail then, pulling her up by her chin. "My daughter is a most sophisticated seductress," he said, voice slow and hypnotic as he drank in her face. "Trust her to woo herself a gullible little rich boy to play her knight in shining armour."

"No," Abigail said. Her cheeks were stained in tears. "You know I'd never try to leave. Why would I want to?" Her voice trembled as her thin frame.

"Hannibal," Will said, under his breath, "I think you've observed long enough." He waited, expecting the familiar flair along his skin, surging in his seal and spreading outward, but it never came. He concentrated on the connection between them. It felt muted, somehow. Will was distantly aware of Hannibal's presence somewhere nearby, but beyond that, there was nothing.

Panic mounting, he tried again, calling out with a loud and firm voice, "Hannibal, answer me!" There was a prickling sensation in the air, and then Will could feel it, Hannibal's full attention

on him, wherever he was, and something akin to concern.

Unfortunately, he also had Hobbs' full attention, as well. "Whoever Hannibal is, he'll be of little help to you now." He jerked the gag back up, forcing it between Will's lips. Then he brought Abigail to her feet, stroking her cheek almost fondly. "Now my dear," he purred. "Is your chance to prove your loyalty." Abigail nodded, unable to take her eyes from her father's. "Go and fetch the gutting knife from the table," Hobbs ordered.

Abigail whimpered, shaking her head. "Please, not again," she said. "Not him, he has nothing to do with this."

"He needs to be taught a lesson, and so, it seems, do you." Hobbs tilted his head towards the far side of the room. "Go and fetch the knife, Abigail."

Will closed his eyes as she moved to obey, taking a centring breath. Beyond Hobbs' vengeful hunger and Abigail's sorrowful regret, he could sense Hannibal, just faintly. He was curious, seeking Will out and unable to find him.

For a wild moment, Will wondered if Hobbs somehow knew, if he was involved with those who worshipped demons and had taken some precaution against them, but then he remembered their last exchange. Will had demanded Hannibal leave him to handle the situation himself, and dismissed him for the evening. Without a verbal command to contradict that one, Hannibal would remain bound by it. He was alone.

With the realisation came the cold certainty that he was about to die, and painfully. He took solace in the fact that at least it would be over far quicker than the torture he'd withstood at the hands of his captors in the past. At the time, he'd begun to train himself to retreat within his mind and distance himself from the pain.

Since then, with Hannibal's help, he'd improved the skill. He used it now, imagining the stream where his mother and Aunt Bedelia used to take him as a child. In the woods on their property, water skipping bright and musical over the stones, eddying in the small pools where he and Alana would catch tadpoles and keep them until they began to sprout legs. His mother and aunt would sit in the shade of the giant ash trees, picnic spread over the grass for when he'd tired himself out.

Now it was empty save for him, wading in the shallow, rushing water. Then there was a displacement of the air behind him, and Abigail came to stand at his side. Dressed in mourning black, eyes downcast, she said, "I'm sorry."

It was something in the way she said it that caught Will's attention. He opened his eyes to watch her pass the knife to her father, and he realised she was speaking not to him, but to Hobbs. Will met her gaze and his suspicion was confirmed.

"It's not the satanic ritual your aunt presumed," Hobbs told him, drawing the flat of the knife across Will's bare shoulder. "It's not done out of cruelty--I never let those girls suffer. It is done out of love."

Will gave him a scornful look and snarled up at him, wished for use of his mouth not to call Hannibal, but to tell this man just how pathetic he was. Hobbs smiled, as sharp as his blade. "But you..." He pressed down hard enough to break the skin with the wicked, hooked tip of the

knife and Will inhaled sharply, the immediacy of the pain startling. “You I’ll enjoy hurting quite a lot.”

Hobbs hooked the blade over the top of Will’s corset and gave a tug. As easily as a hot blade through butter, it sliced through the fabric. Will sucked in his belly, watching the tip skim his skin. It left an angry red line in its wake, but no blood this time. He let out his breath slowly, struggling to maintain his calm, waiting. Abigail had begun to sidle away from her father’s side, towards the head of the bed.

Will wondered what she was waiting for, and then it became clear, when Hobbs set aside the blade on the pillow by Will’s head. He grabbed his corset with both hands, ripping it the rest of the way clear of his body. Abigail moved, quick as a snake. Whatever it was she did with the mechanism at the headboard, there was suddenly slack enough in the chain for Will’s arms to fall a bit more towards the bed.

Hobbs was as surprised as Will himself, but Will had at least known *something* was coming. That was warning enough to give him the split second of advantage. He moved almost without thought, surging forward to wrap the chain from his right arm around Hobbs’ neck and grab it with left. His weight did the rest of the work for him. The give was not enough to support them both.

They flailed together, and Abigail, looking between them fretfully, knocked the knife to the floor, out of her father’s reach. That was hardly the end to his advantage over Will. He had at least a foot of height, and probably close to a sixty pounds. Will’s forearms trembled with the strength it took to keep his hold on the chain, fists clenched tight and aching.

After a moment, Hobbs stopped trying to unwind the chain. Instead, he went for Will’s throat, eyes like blue fire. Will strained against the manacles on his ankles, desperate for more leverage, and suddenly they were free. Will brought one foot up between them, braced on Hobbs stomach and shoved with all his might.

Will could feel Hannibal, sensing his desperation, struggling against the order that kept him away. It warmed Will, gave him the energy to keep fighting, even though Hobbs’ grip on his throat was tight, cutting off the flow of blood to Will’s head. Already dizzy from the effects of whatever drug Hobbs had used on him, Will struggled to maintain consciousness. With every passing second, he could feel his strength flagging, but Hobbs’ was, too, fingers growing looser and looser.

Back at the headboard, Abigail turned the dial back the way it had come. Will’s arms were jerked upward, and Hobbs’ neck along with him. With a wet, gurgling sound, his hands finally went slack on Will’s throat. Red swam across Will’s vision, head splitting and throbbing, shoulder joints on fire, fingers locked so tightly he wasn’t sure he could make them let go.

There was a rushing noise in his ears, like the tide, and he could see her moving her mouth, but couldn’t hear what Abigail was saying. She undid the cuffs, letting Will collapse back against the bed, Hobbs a dead weight above him. Will twisted, shoving aside his body and leaning over the edge of the bed for the knife, just in case. At the same time, he tugged the gag from his mouth.

Abigail was watching him cautiously, dancing back out of reach. He was still held in place by the manacles around his ankle, and had no doubt he looked crazed in that moment. "Hannibal," he shouted, voice coming out broken and hoarse. "Come to me at once."

The air rippled with power. His seal lit up with white-hot pain and then Hannibal was at his side, eyes red with impotent rage as he took in the sight before him. "*Will*." He went down on one knee, hand on Will's neck, gentling back his curls to see the damage. The cool fabric of his gloves was soothing against Will's skin.

A pitiful, whimpering cry bubbled out of Will's chest and past his lips before he could stop it, and he flung his arms around Hannibal's shoulders, burying his face in his solid chest. Hannibal's hands pressed against his back, the one bearing his seal laid lightly over Will's own seal. Through the layer of his glove, the sensation was not as powerful, but it was still reassuring.

"Is he dead?" Will asked. "I didn't know--I thought it would take longer."

Hannibal disentangled himself from Will's hold and rolled Hobb's body off him entirely. He laid his fingers to Hobbs' neck and his lips flattened in displeasure. "He's dead," he confirmed. "A pity. If ever there were a soul I'd like to eat..."

Abigail was silent, watching, as Hannibal stood. He moved Hobbs body to the floor and undid Will's manacles with a wave of his hand. Will sat up fitfully, in the ruins of his undergarments. Only the bloomers remained, and his shoulders slumped gratefully when Hannibal shrugged out of his jacket.

"Perhaps next time you should be more careful with your orders, My Lord," he said, eyes purposefully avoiding Will's as he tugged the jacket closed and did up the buttons.

Will ducked his head, turning his cheek into the collar of Hannibal's jacket. It smelled of him, spicy tea and honey, and the barest hint of sulfur. He shouldn't take comfort in it, but all the same he did. He snorted humourlessly.

"What is it?" Hannibal asked.

"This is the second time this week I've been rendered unconscious thanks to Jack Crawford," Will muttered. "And both times, I've ended up in your jacket."

"Yes, well." At the mention of Jack, Hannibal's lips thinned further, if such a thing were possible. "Let's not make it a habit, shall we?"

Exhaustion and relief trembled cold through Will's limbs and body, making him weak. He gave no protest when Hannibal scooped him up into his arms. If it were to become habit, at least he had Hannibal in the aftermath, to see him home safely. Will laughed shakily at that thought, and ignored Hannibal's querulous eyebrow. Better not to mention out loud the irony of feeling safe in the arms of the monster who would some day kill him.

Abigail watched them, and when Hannibal moved towards the steps, she came to stand between them. Her curled fingers pressed against her lips, eyes darting between them and her father's body. "Wh--what do I do now?"

No sooner were the words past her lips than she broke down in tears. Her body swayed with the force of it and Will squirmed in Hannibal's arms, a softly murmured, "put me down," under his breath.

Will reached out a hand, surprised when Abigail seized it and held it close to her chest. "I'm so sorry," she said. "I didn't mean to drag you into this. I tried to warn you to leave."

"You didn't drag me into it," Will assured her. "I came for your father myself. He thought no one would miss those girls. He was wrong."

Abigail shook her head. "But he wasn't." She sniffled, pressing her sleeve against her cheek, wiping away the tears. "He was always so careful before, only taking them two or three times a year. I thought someone would notice and stop him, but they never did. And then..." She bit her lip, and another rush of tears spilled over. "Mother said I would be attending the *débutante* ball this season, and..."

"He couldn't bear the idea of parting with you," Will finished for her. He left out the nature of Hobbs' longing for her, and the certainty that he'd have never let her go. He'd have kept killing prostitutes until some boy began to court Abigail, and then, in his grief, he'd have killed her, too. Will had an inkling that she already knew.

"He'd...he'd make me help, after," Abigail whispered. "Once they were dead." Her gaze lifted to Will's briefly, and then, as if she knew what he'd see there, down again. But Will didn't blame her for her participation, even if it went beyond what she'd admit. How could he, with all he'd seen and done, all the things he'd ordered Hannibal to do?

"It will be alright," Will told her, and maybe it wasn't a lie. Maybe she could recover from this. "No one will know that but us."

"But--" Abigail made an aborted gesture at the room around them and all it encapsulated.

"Go back to the party," Hannibal said. "Have a drink, smile for your mother, and never speak a word of this to another soul. We shall handle the rest."

All the fight left Abigail at those words, her shoulders slumped, head hung, eyes distant and glassy. She was cast adrift, unable to function for herself after living so long under her father's absolute rule. Will could feel her grief over his loss, as well as her relief, warring within her. Her gratitude was genuine when she thanked them and turned away, heading for the stairs.

Will had thought to leave this mess for Jack to sort out, but now he knew he would do whatever was necessary to protect Abigail from his scrutiny. "Get rid of it," he ordered Hannibal.

"It, Sir?" Hannibal echoed, seeking clarity. "The body?"

"The body, the antlers, the bed--any trace of those girls, or who Hobbs was, or what he did. I want it all gone," Will said. He saw the gears turning behind Hannibal's eyes, narrowed in scrutiny. "What?"

"Only that it's unusual to see you so moved by the plight of another." Hannibal looked downright stymied, as he sometimes did, when confronted with human emotion he himself had never experienced and could not comprehend.

“I help others all the time for Jack,” Will protested. “It’s what I *do*.”

“Out of obligation. No,” Hannibal stepped closer, eyes pouring over Will’s features like he was a puzzle to be solved. “This is different. Do you feel some kinship for this girl?”

Will set his shoulders back, spine straight, and tossed his hair out of his face. “Maybe,” he said. “What does it matter to you?”

Hannibal lifted a hand, trailing the back of his hand down Will’s cheek. It was a gesture reminiscent of Hobbs’, but the shiver it drew from him was altogether different in nature. He didn’t answer in words, but Will saw it in Hannibal’s eyes. The keen interest in Will’s every motivation. Where for each of them, the thoughts and feelings of everyone around them were so simple to discern, but they alone remained a mystery to one another.

Will relented, just a little, looking away first. “She reminds me of myself in some way. Not in the ways we’re alike, but in how we differ. Abigail strikes me as a survivor.”

“Are you not a survivor, My Lord?” Hannibal asked. His knuckles brushed under Will’s chin, tipping back his head, forcing their eyes to meet again.

“I suppose it depends on how you define it, and where the line falls, separating survival from mere continued existence,” Will murmured. He stepped back, far enough for Hannibal’s hand to fall at his side. “I want to go home now. You can come back to clean up after.”

~*~

Hannibal waited until Will was asleep before he returned to the Hobbs manor. His young lord accepted danger as a matter of course, but Hannibal was unused to such excitement in the lives of his charges. Even the high ranking members of the military, the royalty under contested reign, the degenerate gamblers, and the most accomplished thieves had never been assaulted with the same frequency as Will.

Despite his ambivalence towards Jack, Hannibal was not at all opposed to Will’s work. The detrimental effects of his gift wasn’t enough to cause Will to stop doing what he did. He could speak of duty, but Hannibal knew it to be more than obligation that drove Will to help those whose suffering he felt.

It was down that fundamental flaw in his nature; a dichotomy that tore him apart a bit more with every passing day. The sensitive and loving boy swallowed up by his empathy for those whose suffering he experienced, and the calculating, bloodthirsty young man who sought vengeance on those who had wronged him and showed no mercy in his pursuit of justice.

His work for Jack satisfied both halves, but at what cost? Hannibal had tasted Will’s potential for darkness when he’d first found the boy, half-dead and fuelled with anguish and rage. He’d thought then that he’d known the depths of it within Will, and longed to see it unleashed.

Yet, in all their time together, with all the deaths Will ordered, he still retained those tattered shreds of goodness and innocence. Hannibal was beginning to think Will always would, no matter the lengths he went to in order to secure his revenge. How fascinating, and entirely unprecedented, to think that Hannibal would consume the soul of one of his masters that

remained at least partially unsullied. Until Will, every one of Hannibal's masters had give up that last sliver the moment they'd struck their deal with him.

Would Hannibal even be permitted to take such a soul, when the time came? There were rules, after all, binding those of his ilk from simply taking any soul they desired. Others might never have made the deal with Will in the first place, or have cut their losses by now, but Hannibal was willing to take the risk, for a soul such as his.

The cleaning up of Hobb's basement was a simple enough matter with Hannibal's magic, but it was necessary to pay close attention to detail, so there would remain no trace. Hannibal might be inclined to leave some small clue behind. Some carefully displayed tidbit that might later resurface to further complicate the matter. It was in his nature, after all, to create as much chaos and strife as he was capable. But Will's orders had been clear, and therefore Hannibal must be thorough.

As he was leaving, blending effortlessly in with the shadows, he was nonetheless aware of a set of eyes upon him. It was the young Abigail Hobbs, standing at the open window of her second floor bedroom. She barely flinched when he disappeared in a whirl of smoke and reappeared at her shoulder in the dark of her room.

"I don't know how to pretend it never happened," Abigail whispered. "How I can ever be normal again."

Hannibal could take all the memories that haunted Abigail and make them disappear. The knowledge of what had happened would linger at the edge of her mind like the remnants of a bad dream, but she could live a normal life. He often wondered as to why he was capable of half the things he was, when he'd never be so inclined. If Will had ordered it, perhaps, but the misery and pain were far too delicious.

Yet it was clear that Will did not wish to see her suffering. He'd felt a connection with her that went beyond his ability. A desire to interact with her where he usually retreated from human contact, and that intrigued Hannibal, as most things did where Will was concerned. What had Will seen in this girl?

Hannibal couldn't read her in the same way as Will. The negative emotions that swirled and eddied around Abigail told of the tragedy that befell her, but all the smaller details, the minutiae that had made her into the young woman that stood before him, those escaped Hannibal. He found that he would like to know, if only to better understand Will's connection to her.

Testing, Hannibal reached out to lay a hand against her head, hair silky-fine under his palm. Her eyes fluttered closed briefly--apprehension giving way to some positive emotion he couldn't name. "It might do you some good to speak further with Lord Graham."

"Because of what happened to his parents, or because of what he did to my father?"

Hannibal smiled in answer, and Abigail shifted. Her unease surged up against Hannibal like a physical thing. "I think you should come to tea next week," he said. "I'll send one of the servants around with a formal invitation in the morning."

With that he departed, nothing but a cloud of black smoke on the evening breeze.

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